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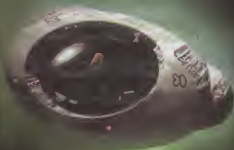
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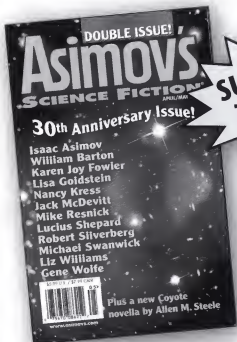
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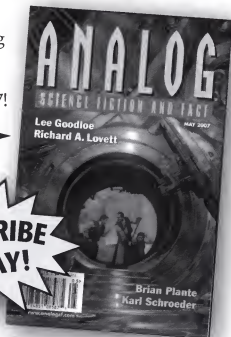
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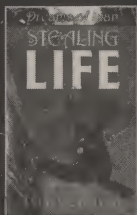
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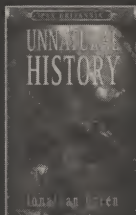
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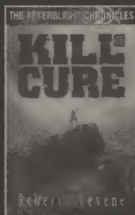
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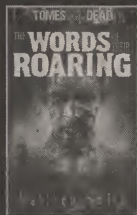
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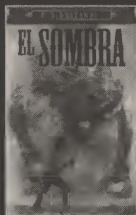
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SEPTEMBER 2007

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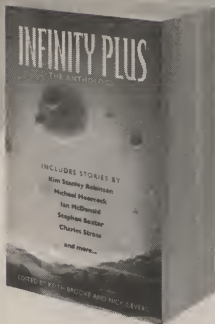
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## 2007 READERS' AWARDS

Awards, awards, awards. Last month, I brought word of the results of the Dell Magazine Award for Best SF or Fantasy short story by an undergraduate. This month, I bring news of your own Readers' Awards poll. Unlike last year, the fiction categories races were unusually tight. Many of you indicated that because you liked so many stories, it wasn't easy to make a final decision. Michael Bowden, a subscriber from Canada, summed up the process: "VERY hard to choose among all fields given the overall high quality of the stories and the sources of the stories—what it is about them that drives them and makes them memorable—is wonderfully variegated." This indecision is gratifying to my cruel editor's heart, since I deliberately choose stories for *Asimov's* that appeal to your wide-ranging tastes.

Ultimately, of course, our winners successfully nudged out their competition, and several were on hand to collect their awards at our breakfast reception. The ceremony was held in New York City on May 12<sup>th</sup> at Roy's New York in the Marriott Financial Center. Guests included our best novella winner, Paul Melko; best novelette winner, Paolo Bacigalupi; and best poem winner, Darrell Schweitzer. They were joined by managing editor Brian Bieniowski and our associate publisher Christine Begley, as well as our semi-permanent guests—Connie Willis and her daughter

Cordelia, and James Patrick Kelly. *Analog's* Anlab ceremony was held at the same time and their guests included Stan and Joyce Schmidt, Trevor Quachri, Barry and Jean Longyear, and John Hemry. The press was represented by Ernest Lilley for *Locus* and Scott Edelman of *SF Weekly*.

Paul Melko's winning story, "The Walls of the Universe," was a Nebula nominee as well, and, much later in the day, he and our other Nebula finalist—William Shunn for "Inclination"—watched as they both lost the award to our own Internet columnist, Jim Kelly. Jim's novella, "Burn," was published as a stand-alone book by Tachyon Publications. Paul and Bill have a shot at a rematch, though, since their stories are currently finalists for the Hugo Award, too.

I first met Paolo Bacigalupi at last year's Nebula ceremony, and I was delighted that he could fly in from Colorado to collect the Readers' Award for his dark and disturbing novelette about the "Yellow Card Man." Paolo's story contrasted with "Impossible Dreams," the amusing and romantic tale by Tim Pratt that won for best short story. Paolo and Tim are also up for the Hugo Awards, along with six other *Asimov's* stories.

Tim couldn't be on hand to collect his award, but, happily, our winning poet arrived straight from an early morning Philadelphia train. Darrell Schweitzer, an assistant editor from *Asimov's* early days, won the award

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Photo: Ernest Lilley

From left: Paolo Bacigalupi, Darrell Schweitzer, Sheila Williams, Paul Melko, Brian Bieniowski.

for his nostalgic poem about “Remembering the Future.”

One person who couldn’t make the award ceremony was artist-award winner J.K. Potter. Jeff’s March cover illustrated David Ira Cleary’s “The Kewlest Thing of All.” Although this artist’s work may have been new to some of you—one person asked if his name was a pseudonym—Jeff was prominent in the fantastic fiction field long before J.K. Rowling began publishing tales about a certain apprenticing wizard. Jeff’s evocative work appeared on a number of *Asimov’s* covers in the mid-eighties. Indeed, in a time before we bestowed an award for best artist, Jeff provided the cover art for our first best-novelette winner—“The Prisoner of Chillon” by James Patrick Kelly (June 1986). We’re glad to have him back and hope to see more of his work on future covers of *Asimov’s*.

As always, the breakfast was a

lot of fun, but I had even more fun reading through the comments that so many of you send along with your award ballots. There’s some constructive criticism and great deal of positive reinforcement. In addition to letting me know how hard it was to squeeze your favorites onto three lines, many of you thanked me for using a number of new writers. Others asked for the work of long-time favorites. I can assure you that we are hard at work acquiring stories from both types of authors.

Alan K. Lipton, a subscriber for twenty-seven years said, “This is my first Readers’ Award ballot. I should do it again—it makes me feel more involved with a magazine that’s like a family member. Thank you for continuing, and thank you for a consistently great experience.”

I look forward to hearing from many more of you in next year’s poll. ○



# **2007 READERS' AWARD WINNERS**

## **BEST NOVELLA**

1. **THE WALLS OF THE UNIVERSE;**  
**PAUL MELKO**
2. A Billion Eves; Robert Reed
3. Lord Weary's Empire; Michael Swanwick
4. Inclination; William Shunn
5. Down to the Earth Below; William Barton

## **BEST NOVELETTE**

1. **YELLOW CARD MAN;**  
**PAOLO BACIGALUPI**
2. The Djinn's Wife; Ian McDonald
3. Dawn, and Sunset, and the Colours of the Earth; Michael F. Flynn
4. Under the Graying Sea; Jonathan Sherwood
5. The Gabble; Neal Asher

## **BEST SHORT STORY**

1. **IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS;**  
**TIM PRATT**
2. The Osteomancer's Son; Greg van Eekhout
3. The Small Astral Object Genius; James Van Pelt
4. Life on the Preservation; Jack Skillingstead
5. Nano Comes to Clifford Falls; Nancy Kress

## **BEST POEM**

1. **REMEMBERING THE FUTURE**  
**DARRELL SCHWEITZER**
2. Copyright Notice, 2525; David Livingstone Clink
3. An Eccentric in Orbit; Laurel Winter
4. It's Not Easy Being Dead; Bruce Boston
5. Chaos Theory; William John Watkins

## **BEST COVER**

1. **MARCH;**  
**J.K. POTTER**
2. September; Donato Giancola
3. April/May; Bob Eggleton
4. February; Dominic Harman
5. December; Jeroen Advocaat

## SADDAM WASN'T THE WORST

**T**he news in recent years has brought us a lot of grim, violent stuff originating in Iraq. First came the forcible removal from power of the bloodthirsty tyrant Saddam Hussein, who during a long reign was responsible for the deaths of thousands—maybe hundreds of thousands—of his own citizens. Then, upon Saddam's fall, came a host of Iraqi mini-tyrants who have imposed a chaotic, anarchic insurgency upon that unhappy country, giving it a daily ration of suicide bombers, attacks on places of worship, and other horrors.

Iraq these days is a troubled and troublesome place. But when we look back across that country's history, as I've been doing lately, we see a grand tradition of monstrous violence there stretching back thousands of years. Saddam wasn't the first ogre to rule Iraq. Nor was he—by some distance—the worst.

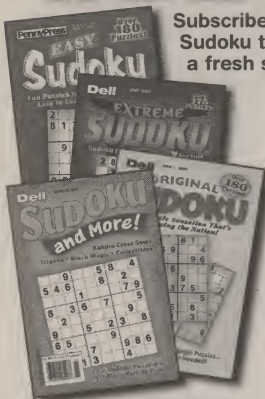
I ought to clarify, at this point, what I mean by "Iraq." As a national name, that's a fairly recent one. My eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1910 and considered a reliable compendium of just about all that was known at that time, says nothing about "Iraq," though it does have an entry for "Irak-Arabi," which it tells us is "the name employed since the Arab conquest to designate that portion of the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates known in older literature as Babylonia." Irak-Arabi, we learn, is made up of two unequal portions: "an exten-

sive dry steppe with a healthy desert climate, and an unhealthy region of swamps," the latter being in the southern region. Two great rivers run through the area, the Tigris and the Euphrates, which had led the Romans to give the area the name of *Mesopotamia*, "the land between the rivers." Certain portions of the country, the encyclopedia reports, are periodically terrorized by uncontrollable Bedouin marauders, and the whole place, after a period of great prosperity in the early days of Arab rule more than a thousand years ago, "has now returned to a condition of semi-barbarism."

The territory once known as Irak-Arabi had come under Persian rule in the fourteenth century, then fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1534, and entered into a long period of stagnation and disarray. The Ottomans divided it into two provinces, with Basra as the capital of the swampy south and Baghdad the capital of the central area where the two rivers are closest together. The old Roman province of Mesopotamia had had a third district north of that, which the Ottomans made a province with its administrative center at Mosul, close by the ruins of Nineveh, the ancient capital of the warlike kingdom of Assyria. When the Ottoman Empire was broken up after World War I, its three Mesopotamian provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra were combined by the victorious Allies to create the new independent nation

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of Iraq, with Faisal, an Arabian-born prince, as its first king. A revolution in 1958 expelled the royal dynasty and Iraq has been a republic ever since, under the rule of a series of oppressive dictators culminating in Saddam Hussein.

The key thing that emerges from this quick tour of history is that present-day Iraq is a hodgepodge of incompatible nationalities deriving primarily from the ancient kingdoms of Babylonia and Assyria. (The coming of Islam has added a further complication because of the division between Sunni and Shiite religious factions: the Sunnis are dominant in northern Iraq, the Shiites in the south, and the central area holds a mixture of both groups.)

Lately I've been delving into early Mesopotamian history, thanks to a fascinating book I acquired a few months ago called *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*. This, edited by Daniel David Luckenbill, a professor of Semitic languages at the University of Chicago, and published by the University in 1927, is a collection of translations of inscriptions left behind by the Assyrian kings. It's easy to see from the fierce boasts of those bloodthirsty monarchs that Saddam had been using

them as role models during his thirty years of rule in the region that had once been theirs. Anyone who had the sort of old-fashioned education that I was lucky enough to have, a couple of generations ago, is well aware, of course, of what bad guys the Assyrians were. Though I was never particularly religious, I did read the Bible—King James Version—for its literary value, and in the Old Testament I encountered again and again the villainous Assyrians who forever made life so tough for my Hebrew ancestors.

In II Kings, for example, the tale is told of the Assyrian invasion of the two Jewish kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Israel fell first, and its people were carried off to Assyria in captivity. Then, II Kings reports, "in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah did Sennacherib king of Assyria come up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them." Sennacherib, who had previously conquered neighboring Babylonia and much of Palestine, demanded an immense tribute, "and Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king's house. And at that time did Hezekiah cut off the gold from the doors of the temple of the

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Lord, and from the pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria."

Lord Byron, in a gaudy poem called "The Destruction of Sennacherib" that I loved when I was a boy, has this to say of the savage Assyrian attack:

*The Assyrian came down like  
a wolf on the fold*

*And his cohorts were gleaming  
in purple and gold;*

*And the sheen of their spears  
was like stars on the sea*

*When the blue wave rolls  
nightly on deep Galilee.*

In the Biblical version, and Byron's, things end fairly well for the Hebrews: the Lord hears his people's prayers, and the Angel of Death goes among the Assyrians in their camp outside Jerusalem, smiting them so vehemently that in one night "an hundred fourscore and five thousand" are slain, "so Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh."

Upon turning to Luckenbill's *Ancient Records of Assyria*, I made two interesting discoveries: one, that the Assyrian invasion of Judah took place pretty much as the Bible describes, and, two, that the Jewish kingdom may have survived the onslaught not by the miraculous intervention of God but by the payment of that stiff tribute. For this is what the actual inscriptions of Sennacherib, who ruled Assyria from 705 to 681 B.C., have to say:

As for Hezekiah, the Jew,  
who had not submitted to my  
yoke, forty-six of his strong,  
walled cities and the cities of

their environs, which were  
numberless, I besieged, I captured,  
as booty I counted them.  
Him, like a caged bird, in  
Jerusalem, his royal city, I  
shut up. . . . I imposed the payment  
of yearly gifts by them,  
as tax, and laid it upon him.  
That Hezekiah—the terrifying  
splendor of my royalty overcame  
him. . . . With thirty talents of  
gold, eight hundred talents of  
silver, and all kinds of treasure  
from his palace, he sent his  
daughters, his palace women,  
his male and female singers,  
to Nineveh, and he dispatched  
his messengers to pay the tribute.

*Ancient Records of Assyria* is, in fact, a voluptuous record of Assyria's ferocious wars against its neighbors, one proud king after another describing his gory victories. Here is Sennacherib conquering Babylon:

With mines and engines I  
took the city. . . . Whether small  
or great, I left none. With their  
corpses I filled the city squares.  
. . . The city and its houses, from  
its foundation to its top, I destroyed,  
I devastated, I burned with fire.  
. . . Through the midst of that  
city I dug canals, I flooded its  
site with water, and the very  
foundations thereof I destroyed.  
I made its destruction more  
complete than by a flood.

And this is an earlier king, Asurnasirpal, defeating the city of Dirra:

For two days, from before  
sunrise, I thundered against  
them like Adad, the god of the  
storm, and I rained down  
flame upon them. . . . I cap-

tured the city, eight hundred of their warriors I struck down with the sword, I cut off their heads. . . . A pillar of living men and of heads I built in front of their city gate, seven hundred men I impaled on stakes in front of their city gate. The city I destroyed, I devastated, I turned it into mounds and ruins; their young men I burned in the flames.

Here is King Shamsi-Adad V, telling of his conquest of Urash:

That city I stormed, I captured. With the blood of their warriors I dyed the squares of their cities like wool. Six thousand of them I smote. Pirishati, their king, together with one thousand of his fighters, I seized alive. Their spoil—their property, their goods, their cattle, their flocks, their horses, vessels of silver, splendid gold, and copper, in countless numbers, I carried off. Their cities I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire.

On and on it goes, two fat volumes of it, king after king blithely describing the most ghastly acts of war. "Karkar I burned with fire. Its king I flayed. . . ." "I slaughtered like lambs and bespattered with the venom of death the rest of the rebellious people. . . ." "I killed large numbers of his troops, the bodies of his warriors I cut down like millet, filling the mountain valleys with them. I made their blood run down the ravines and precipices like a river, dyeing plain countryside and highlands red like a royal robe. . . ." "Like a young gazelle I mounted the high-

est peaks in pursuit of them. To the summits of the mountains I pursued them and brought about their overthrow. Their cities I captured and I carried off their spoil; I destroyed, I devastated, I burned them with fire."

Open the two volumes anywhere and it's the same stuff: "I destroyed, I devastated, I burned them with fire." I can readily imagine Saddam Hussein, who fancied himself as the successor to the kings of Assyria and Babylonia and set up some inscriptions of his own in the restored ruins of the city of Babylon, reading these books and nodding approvingly—"Right on, Sennacherib! Way to go, Assurnasirpal!" and picking up some ideas on governance from them.

All of which proves, I guess, that the more things change, the more they remain the same. Perhaps it's something in the waters of the Tigris or the Euphrates that has bred these monsters in the land once known as Mesopotamia and now called Iraq; or perhaps the Assyrian kings were no worse than any other rulers of their day, but were simply more enthusiastic in bragging of their atrocities.

What I find most interesting about these horrifying testaments of atrocity isn't their ghastliness but the mere fact that we are capable of reading them at all, written as they were on tablets of clay in what is now a lost language and a strange wedge-shaped script. It strikes me as a good idea to talk about how we came to understand the inscriptions of the Assyrians and the Babylonians in the first place, next issue. ○



## ASTEROID PEOPLE

If asteroid people  
were the world  
we would be a rough  
and tumble lot,  
scarred by our  
passage through life.

Unless we spent  
our time considering  
one another's paths  
and inclinations,  
there would be  
no telling where  
any of us could be  
found: near or far,  
coming or leaving.

We would all remain  
moving targets to one  
another, confounded by  
the erratic behavior  
of those we once took  
for allies and friends.

Inevitably some of us  
would collide head on,  
and the consequences  
would be shattering.

If asteroid people  
were the world  
we would be a rough  
and tumble lot,  
always in transit with  
no clear destinations.

It would be a bumpy  
ride most every night.

—Bruce Boston



# THE CALDERA OF GOOD FORTUNE

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us that inspiration for the following story came "a couple of summers back. My family and I went to Estes Park, in Colorado, on vacation. It's a small town on the Front Range, and since there's no big snow in winter, the tourists arrive only in summer. We were riding the local cable car up a mountainside, and some fellow in his thirties—a local, I gathered—bummed a free ride. I pieced together that he was a rock climber of some fame. The old mountain goat was telling stories, working hard to impress a high schooler with his casual daring. Later, at an outdoor concert, a pair of summer police officers strolled past. They were young women, probably in their earliest twenties, and, without question, they were the prettiest cops I have ever seen. Every man in the crowd watched them pass. Then my wife quietly muttered, 'You can feel the intimidation, can't you?' 'Caldera' rolled around in my head until I decided to put it on the Great Ship. And then it proved exceptionally easy to write."

1

**T**he hamlet was forbidden to wear any name, and, by decree, its population and borders were never allowed to grow. Tucked inside a high valley, the tiny community was flanked on three sides by walls of dense, ancient rock—a black rock flecked with white and dubbed "granite" because of a

passing resemblance to the bones of Old Earth. Stunted forests of cold-adapted, light-starved trees grew wild on those slopes, while the caldera's rim was reserved for native life forms. Visiting the rim required special permission from the Luckies. Exceptions were allowed when one of the hamlet's permanent citizens acted as an Honored Guide. Twenty-five hundred humans, aliens, and AIs lived permanently in the nameless hamlet. On the strength of an address, even the laziest among them made good livings. Passengers came from the far reaches of the Great Ship, eager to walk the high rim and gaze into the caldera's magnificent lake. But when the prolonged winter was finished—when the signs pointed at catastrophic change—the fattest of the fat times began. The lake began to simmer and bubble, and news quickly spread among the wealthy everywhere. Suddenly tens of thousands of strangers would ride the tram into the high valley, dressed for the brutal cold, happily paying insane fees for the chance to sleep in somebody's cellar or attic, or stacked like logs in the back of a little closet. The hamlet was transformed by these bright cheery souls who sang drinking songs and spent fortunes on the overpriced food, all while watching vapor rising from behind the towering rim. Guests were constantly searching out the natives, asking them when the caldera would finally erupt. Soon, was the standard reply; unless of course the Luckies decided otherwise. But how long would the eruption last, if it actually began? Ten Ship-days was the average—time enough for the entire lake to boil skyward and freeze solid. And how big and beautiful would the new mountain be? Enormous and gorgeous, the residents promised. And that wasn't just because they wanted to peel more money from these prosperous souls; even the most jaded, sun-starved citizens looked forward to the spectacle of fragile, moon-washed ice hanging over their drab little home.

Narrow trails crisscrossed the valley walls, eventually leading to the rim. But hiking was thankless work and a considerable investment of time. Cable cars offered quicker, easier journeys. For thousands of years, tourists had gathered inside the spacious, overheated cable car station, and locals who wanted work sat with their backs to the caldera, gossiping with one another, waiting patiently for the first worthwhile offer.

Crockett had planned to do nothing that day but sleep. The lake had been steaming for weeks, and he'd already made plenty. But then a friend mentioned that today only, a certain pair of security officers was patrolling in and around the cable car station.

As it happened, those officers were very beautiful and very human.

At the end of winter, when the hamlet was jammed with strangers, outsiders were hired to help fill critical jobs. Included in their ranks was a platoon of security officers, human and otherwise. Judging the age of immortals was difficult; modern flesh and bone endured the ages as well as any granite could. But those two women carried a palpable, delicious sense of youth. They smiled constantly—weightless, untroubled grins common to barely grown people. In their walks and the secure tilt of their heads, they looked unaffected by responsibility. Their skin was as smooth and clear as any Crockett had ever seen, which was another clue: After a few centuries of life, most humans cultivated wrinkles near the eyes, hinting at wisdoms that might or might not be present. If appearances

could be believed, those two girls were thrilled to be living in the hamlet, however briefly. They always patrolled together, whispering to each other constantly, and they shared giggles and various knowing looks. Several times, Crockett had watched them standing in the middle of a crowded street, ignoring the shoving bodies, holding gloved hands as they gazed up at the distant rim of the caldera and the curtain of fresh steam that rose into the gloom and then froze, falling where the winds let it fall as this spring's first snow.

Those girls were the reason Crockett walked to the cable car station and sat with his neighbors, making small talk while deflecting the tourists: He was waiting for that moment when he would see the objects of his affection.

"Is my offer not enough?" asked a lumbering *Tamias*.

"Your offer is most generous," Crockett replied, examining the alien's rodent-like face with an appropriately indirect gaze. "But my ass is comfortable, and I will leave it where it is for now."

Next came a Hippocampus that shuffled forwards—a pregnant male, by the looks of its belly. The creature took a deep breath and held the rich air inside his long neck, assessing the captured odors. Then he bowed to Crockett, but before he could speak, the human warned, "I am claimed by others, my friend. At present, I am helpless to help you."

Without complaint, the alien stepped down the line and took another defining breath, and after a few moments of conversation, hired a little Janusian couple to be his Guides.

Human tourists happened to notice the rebuff. Judging by appearances, they looked like a married couple, and married for a very long time. The wife was less pretty than her husband, carrying quite a few millennia on her bones. Both of them had stepped off a cable car that just returned from the rim, wearing smiles and heavy, self-heating coats and tall boots that had recently walked in the snow. The pretty man approached Crockett. "We wish we could have stayed longer," he confessed. "But our guide was tired, and we had to ride back with her."

Crockett shrugged. "The Luckies won't let you stay up there alone."

The old woman offered a respectable fee.

Crockett was tempted, but only to a point.

"Not enough, is it?" her husband asked.

"I'm a little nervous," Crockett lied. Then he glanced over his shoulder, mentioning, "This eruption is late. It could come any time now."

"Are you certain?" the woman asked.

"Maybe," Crockett conceded with an amiable laugh. "The lake's been simmering longer than usual, and eventually, all that warm water has to leap into the sky."

He had no real predictive skills. Only the Luckies knew when a full eruption was imminent, and they never gave clues.

"Is this your job?" the pretty man asked. "Warning away the innocent?"

"It would be good noble work," Crockett allowed.

Then the wife tugged on her husband's elbow. "Maybe we should go back to our room, dear."

Crockett liked to believe that he understood women. One of the attrac-

tions of living in this nameless place was the parade of wealthy, carefree ladies. This particular old woman gave every sign of wanting attention, and, for a few moments, Crockett imagined that he was her husband. She seemed like an elegant creature, accustomed to money but not spoiled by the stuff. He appreciated that old-fashioned face and build, and maybe there was an old-fashioned address in her past. Could she have come from the Old Earth? That was a fascinating prospect, and watching the amorous couple stroll off into the darkness, he promised himself that he would find them tomorrow. For a modest fee, he'd offer his services as an Honored Guide . . . just to spend a few hours with them, testing his guesses against whatever they revealed about their lives. . . .

Besides Crockett, the only Guides remaining were a pair of rubber-faced AIs and a fiery little vesper. But the little sun had just set, and, as often happened when night began, tourists grew more interested in dinner than a walk in the cold. The vesper soon rose and danced his way home. The AIs plugged into each other, vanishing in their own unimaginable ways. Crockett was alone, and the two objects of interest—those delightful security officers—had yet to pass through the station. Were they delayed? Did some criminal business ruin their timetable? Crockett turned in his chair, watching the banks of steam illuminated by moonlight; and then he heard a sound and looked forward again, exactly at the moment when the two lovelies strode into the almost empty room.

He offered a smile and soft sigh.

Effervescent as always, the officers responded with as much of a glance as he could have hoped for. They were delightful young ladies, each lovely in her way. The shorter one was muscular, with meaty breasts and a buoyant ass. By contrast, her companion was tall and elegant, blessed with a lip-rich mouth and eyes that couldn't have been brighter.

"Hello," Crockett managed.

Giggling, their hands met for a moment.

Not for the first time, he wondered if they were lovers. That was the rumor most often heard during these last weeks. But his favorite gossip was that yes, they were passionate toward one another, but with room and the grace to invite a third party into their passion.

"Everybody else is home or on the rim," he mentioned.

Really, couldn't he find something more memorable to say?

"We should visit the rim sometime," said the taller girl. With a flip of that pretty head, she declared, "You know, we could make it up there and back again before our dinner break is done."

They must have a very long break, Crockett thought.

Since the officers weren't permanent residents, the Luckies—the unseen aliens who owned this realm—wouldn't allow them close without a Guide. Crockett saw his opportunity. In an instant, he came up with an amount that would make him the perfect companion: Not too much, but then again, not so cheap that they'd think he was begging for the honor.

For a long, delightful moment, those two lovely faces stared at him.

Then together, without a word being said, they approached the twin AIs, alerting them of their presence with a pointed finger and a spark of static electricity.

Moments later, a cable car pulled out of the station, four passengers rising silently into the darkness.

This hadn't worked out at all. Crockett waited a few moments, and then he stood, putting on his hood, preparing for the sad walk home.

A lone figure stepped into the vacant station.

Countless aliens were passengers on the Great Ship. According to official counts, thousands of species were among the wealthy, exceptionally important souls onboard, and some aliens took a multitude of physical forms. Of course not every entity wished to visit the Caldera of Good Fortune. But Crockett had never met the species standing before him. Even a rapid search of reliable databases came up with nothing but a few similar creatures. The entity was humanoid and small, with a tiny sucking mouth and smoky white eyes large enough to nearly fill its elliptical face. Those odd eyes regarded Crockett for a contemplative moment. And then, through its translator, the creature asked, "What would be a fair price to ride with me? Up to the top. . .?"

Crockett sliced what was fair in half.

He would have done it for free, happily. But then again, he was still a little upset that his girlfriends had so brazenly ignored him.

## 2

**D**uring those years and decades while the caldera slept, tourists arriving at the hamlet were as likely to gaze at the sky as to stare at the Luckies. Onboard the Great Ship, every habitat wore an elaborate disguise—false horizons painted on cavern walls, with suns and stars wheeling overhead on what was only rock and timeless hyperfiber. But most of these illusions demanded pragmatism over accuracy. A green sky might show clouds and two lovely suns, and then the suns would set, revealing stars by the thousands aligned in a pattern that matched a cherished view some thousand light-years in the past. But modest telescopes focused on any of those stars would reveal the fiction: This artificial cosmos was composed of simple, bland specks of light. Only the brightest few pretended to spit out flares and gas. Only the nearest few were accompanied by the faint glows of other worlds. The universe was rendered accurately enough to fool both casual and lazy eyes—the familiar, indolent vision common to those who have lived for eons inside the same house. Even the most attentive species had limits to their skies. Point telescopes at the blackness between any two stars, and a thousand dimmer suns should be waiting to be found. And if you built even larger mirrors out of polished glass and photon traps, and then peered between the intricate dusts or out toward some galaxy floating on the edge of Creation, there always came a point—that well-defined and inevitable line of exhaustion—where the stars and dim galaxies that should be visible were missing. Were not.

It was the same for the Luckies. But their ceiling was managed by an army of dedicated AIs working with the best available squidskin—an in-

tricate medium that produced light and darkness on a near-atomic scale. Seeing where the illusions broke down . . . well, that kind of telescope was far beyond what most tourists could carry or drag up to the hamlet, much less all the way to the high ridge.

"I love this view," Crockett allowed, hoping to generate conversation. Or even just a neutral comment.

But the alien seemed to cherish its silence.

Luckies loved their sky, and with reason. Their home world was tucked inside a thick bright arm of the Milky Way, not far from an active star nursery. Gaze north, away from the ridge, and the false sky had a beauty and majesty that even the shallowest soul would notice. But the local space was even richer: Five massive moons orbited a substantial brown dwarf, and the brown dwarf was dancing with a quiet little K-class sun, each orbit taking years to accomplish. The Luckies lived on the third moon, tidally locked and constantly massaged by its hefty neighbors. The inner neighbors were volcanic superstars, baked in radiation and their own fierce internal heat; while the outer moons were originally ice-clad and exceptionally cold, but with deep seas waiting beneath their surface.

Crockett liked the illusion of this sky more than the illusion of the landscape. Distant cavern walls were decorated with images of a frigid, bleak and deceptively bland terrain—a slow-moving illusion showcasing volcanoes and stubborn glaciers and wide expanses of lifeless, inert stone.

The Honored Guide turned, and not quite looking at those enormous white eyes, he introduced himself by name.

His companion offered no sound or visible motion.

"Luckies have rules," warned Crockett. "A resident like myself . . . I'm allowed to live here because ages ago, I won a lottery. I'm exceptionally lucky, for a human. And with my address comes the understanding that only my friends can be brought up to the ridge. . . ."

The alien offered a soft chirp.

"Let's go through the motions," Crockett suggested. "For the sake of law and custom, tell me your name."

A moment passed, and another. Then the alien chirped again, and its translator said, "Doom."

"Doom?"

The translator spoke for itself. "That is my best approximation. But it is imperfect, and I apologize."

"What language does the creature use?"

"I cannot say."

"You aren't free to name it?"

"Perhaps I am. But my expertise feels incomplete."

The cable car had been accelerating since leaving the station, riding on a nanowhisker too small to be seen. Once and then twice again, descending cars sped past them, brightly lit and filled with visitors and their newfound friends. Crockett waved at his neighbors. Then he shut down his car's lights, allowing the full effect of the sky to work on odd, silent Doom.

The brown dwarf was a flattened disk barely visible through the vaporous clouds. But an inner moon lay far enough to one side to be visi-



ble—a rough orange and black blister of a world, chunks of its crust melting and exploding outwards with a violence that only looked impressive.

"You know," Crockett began. "All the computing power that goes into these stars, the brown dwarf, and every major and minor moon . . ."

Then he consciously stopped talking.

After a long pause, his companion said, "I am listening."

"The Luckies have peculiar personalities. And a unique biology, as I understand it. They're an old species, yet it took them a long time—a billion years, nearly—to build starships. Not that they weren't interested in their own sky. You see, their preferred habitat are these hot caldera lakes. Each caldera had its own vantage point, its unique and distinct view of the stars. And whenever different populations spoke, they spent a great deal of time explaining what they could see—star for star; moon for moon."

Doom did not speak. But the big eyes were gazing upward, at least accidentally showing interest.

"You probably know all this," Crockett continued, "but during their entire history, the Luckies have built only a handful of starships. Elaborate ships and very reliable, but exceptionally difficult to piece together." Then he held up his hand, squeezing two fingers close together. "A single Lucky is only this big."

The size of a dust mite, in essence.

"But of course, they're never found as individuals. Autochemotrophic metabolisms. Low energy, minimal complexity. Not only aren't they particularly bright creatures, when taken alone, but they're pretty much helpless, too."

Was he interesting his client, or boring it? Either way, Crockett was enjoying his impromptu lecture.

"A few million Luckies are about as sharp as one average human brain," he mentioned. "But they aren't happy until they number in the hundreds of trillions. That's what lives on the other side of this mountain. A nation of tiny entities all tied together. Together, they build giant eyes that float on their lake home, catching every wandering photon. And when enough of the Luckies think hard on one subject, they can dream up the greatest thoughts imaginable." He shrugged, adding, "So what if it took millions of years to accrete a workable starship out of hot ores and salty, acidic water? They had time, and the patience. Really, if you want my opinion, they're incredible, wonderful organisms."

Several more cable cars passed by, looking like gaudy balloons quickly losing altitude. Without exception, the faces inside the balloons were happy, either glad for their adventure or glad to be returning home again.

"Wonderful creatures," he repeated.

Doom was certainly alien, but Crockett sensed emotion. The eyes were jumping inside their sockets now, and the mouth was cocked in a way that didn't look comfortable. It was nervous. *He* was nervous. Plenty of species lacked a sense of gender, but Crockett had spent most of his life riding inside these cars with aliens, and that gave him a healthy respect for his own intuitions.

"Luckies have a weird, interesting model of reality," Crockett continued. "I'm sure you know this. But the idea enjoys repetition."



A tight little breath was audible over the cold hum of the wind.

"Our universe is nothing more, or less, than a very pretty and intensely busy picture. An image that happens to exist on the wall of someone else's living room." With a sweeping gesture, Crockett explained, "If we had some eye that could reach out far enough—into those realms hidden by the Grand Inflation—then the stars would cease to be. The galaxies and quasars and dark-matter masses . . . all those magnificent illusions would simply vanish. . . ."

"Nothing is real," Doom whispered.

"To the Luckies, everything and everyone are fictions. And existence is simply the oldest, finest illusion."

Crockett's new friend whimpered. That was the best description for the mournful little sound. Then the big eyes closed, the lids rising from below, and he said, "Well, perhaps we should hope these little creatures are correct."

### 3

**R**egardless of origins and no matter the vagaries of physiologies, trees adapted to severe cold and darkness often shared physical traits. Large, almost weightless leaves, mirrored and spread wide in the daylight, gathering the glow of the weak illusionary sun, bouncing it into a central bud or vein that was always black or purplish—a spherical receptor encased within an organic crystal, transparent but heavily insulated, clinging to every trace of useable heat. What was living inside any tree was tiny. Think of a man's dead body with a busy heart still beating in the chest; those were the normal proportions. Trees growing in the hamlet had the richest, easiest environment. Warmth leaked from the homes, and the streetlamps were blessings. But it took even the most vigorous Ganymede pine a hundred years for its bulb to expand as much as a good heart filling with hot, living blood.

Perhaps there were other ways to build cold trees. But Crockett had no experience with them. Since coming to the hamlet as a young boy, he had never left. He couldn't afford to go anywhere, since that meant losing his cherished resident status. But he was free to travel by virtual routes, which he did on occasion—witnessing habitats inside the Great Ship and across the galaxy. In general, Crockett preferred hot bright places where trees grew tall as hills and left behind the beautiful wood that he would buy with a tiny portion of his savings, using it to add accents and warmth to the walls of his own tiny house.

Beneath the cable car, the meager local forest was vanishing.

And a moment later, it was gone.

Half a dozen cable cars were sliding past, and with a rough calculation, Crockett decided that only one or two more remained above. The security officers hadn't given up. Smiling, he let himself imagine the girls waiting for him. He pictured them standing side by side, their pretty faces obscured by the layers of heated clothing, but their breath coming quickly

with anticipation, emerging into the gloom and mixing and rising into the rising steam and the falling snows.

The eruption would come today, or next week. Or after several more months of patient bubbling, the heat would dissipate, the artificial magma allowed to cool until this carefully regulated hazard was past.

Eruptions were much the same on the Luckies' home world. Quakes and rising plumes could burst free anywhere. A new volcano might build and then later explode, leaving a gaping wound. Then the heated groundwater would percolate through the fractured crust, filling every hole with a fresh young lake. The first colonists to arrive inside a new caldera were the fortunate ones. They and their descendants ruled until the next eruption. Hence the name: Luckies.

Most cold worlds were sterile, or, at best, had stunted forests incapable of feeding the slowest bug. But the Luckies' home world enjoyed its own good fortune. The soggy, constantly shifting crust was filled with microbes using every metabolic trick. They danced with energetic irons and sodiums, carbon monoxides and nitrates. But the real producers were root-like giants—underground forests that choked every crevice, every pore, feasting on piezoelectric reactions and the physical flexing of the ground, even pumping water into the magma pools, creating steam that powered elaborate, turbine-like organs.

Every eruption was preceded by a season of rapid, joyous growth.

The Luckies riding the Great Ship had just this one caldera. Cataclysmic eruptions weren't possible, much less sought after. But the general rhythms of their old life held sway: Their lake simmered and then boiled, and their crystalline bodies separated and grew tough spore-like shells. Then the volcano erupted, flinging the water skyward as a scalding cloud, and trillions of tiny bodies were flung high by that carefully calibrated blast. Most of the tiny aliens fell outside the caldera, and they were dead. But those that found their way home again were blessed and knew it, and within a few months, they would be well on their way to rebuilding the society from Before.

Even locals referred to the rim community as a forest. But except for a passing resemblance to dead, leafless trees, the landscape had more in common with leaf litter, or better, with compost. The pale gray remains of dead roots had been pushed out of every hole, expelled by what was still living underground. Unlike the mirror-forests below, this realm had animal life—small crawlies and bigger crawlies, everything cloaked in fur and fat and tough genetics and variable metabolisms. But instead of the usual chirps and drummings, Crockett heard only silence. This was new. Yesterday the forest was still jabbering away; but now, for the first time, he found himself wondering if the eruption was imminent.

The cable car slid into its empty berth.

Only one other berth was filled, its passengers probably on the far side of the ridge, gazing down at the bubbling, seemingly bottomless lake.

The car stopped, a polite voice warned everyone about the cold to come, and then the main door slid open.

But the chill wasn't awful. Crockett guessed the air wasn't worse than seventy below—much warmer than the hamlet on any sun-scorched day.

He stepped out onto the wide porch where tourists normally paused to acclimatize themselves, investing a few moments in consideration of witty things that he might say.

His client remained in the car.

Puzzled, Crockett stepped back inside. Doom was standing where he had always stood, but now his eyes were closed.

"Have you changed your mind?" asked Crockett.

The alien didn't speak.

"You're worried about the eruption," Crockett decided. "Well, you shouldn't be. It's a surprisingly peaceful event. I've known plenty who stayed up here while it happened. Keep inside the shelters, or even in a likely hole, and your body won't die for more than a few hours."

Quietly, his friend said, "I will not be returning."

Crockett blinked. "What was that?"

"You may go, if you wish."

"I can't. Not and leave you here."

"But I need to be here," Doom said. "And besides, I do not require your presence. Since I have their permission."

"The Luckies, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Then why bring me at all?" Crockett asked.

Doom had six fingers on each hand, arranged three-and-three. One of his hands had just reached inside his heavy coat, digging deep while the white eyes opened, scanned the Luckies' false-forest.

"Maybe I should go home," Crockett allowed.

"You will have to walk," Doom warned. "Neither car is operational. I am certain they will have seen to that detail."

"Who saw to what?"

The creature's gaze fixed on a distant point.

Crockett asked the car door to close, but nothing happened.

Then Doom began to retrieve his hand, and with a firm, half-loud voice, he said, "My good friend, I am sorry for your involvement in this."

"Sorry—?" Crockett began.

And then the world turned to fire and a searing golden light.

#### 4

**D**rifting back into consciousness—in that instant when misery and clarity were roughly balanced—Crockett decided that the caldera had erupted. Where else would the flash of light come from? How else could his body have been flung hard against the floor? But then he gently set his gloved hand against his worst ache—the top of his head—and discovered that the insulated hood was missing, and his long golden hair was missing, and a palm-sized patch of the scalp had been burnt down to the hard bone. A thousand emergency systems were awake, throwing their talents into protecting the brain and knitting new flesh. Adrenalin and fancier stimulants enlarged his senses, slowing time to a contemplative

crawl. Crockett wasn't scared, much less panicked. He felt alert and focused and incapable of fear, absorbing his surroundings with curiosity and a powerful, intoxicating detachment.

A focused blast had punctured the cable car, destroying the door and then the far end. The wind blowing up the valley was drifting through the gutted car and then out again, carrying away the final traces of smoke and burnt flesh. Doom lay in a corner, limp and headless. Whatever had knocked Crockett to the floor had struck the alien with its full force, evaporating tough tissues and the skull, and whatever lay beneath.

Was the brain lost?

Was his client dead?

A pragmatic voice asked how this was possible. The slow wet eruption of the caldera couldn't produce the energies necessary to kill. Maybe the rising steam and falling snow had produced some exotic species of ball lightning. But even the most murderous species of meteorology couldn't produce this kind of disaster, he told himself.

Really, this resembled a military-grade weapon—

Yes, a plasma gun. Someone higher on the ridge could have taken the shot, gutting the car this way. Except who would own such a device, and why would they, and what conceivable reason would make anyone shoot at Crockett?

But he wasn't the target.

If he were, he would be dead. Plainly.

At long last, a useful terror emerged. Crockett managed a deep breath and dropped down, throwing both arms over his wounded head. Yet a second blast wouldn't be impressed with a few obscuring limbs. He needed to move, to hide. But he discovered that in these few moments, his terror had swollen out of control. He couldn't move, even to save himself. He lay there like a scared, whimpering boy, expecting another flash and the sudden removal of his existence.

Then the corpse sat up.

The six-fingered hand continued the motion begun before death, revealing some kind of ballistic weapon with a wide stubby barrel that lifted now—a blind hand aiming by memory or by unsuspected senses. There was a soft, almost musical report. An object flew out of the shattered car, and a moment later, a muscular blast rolled across the slope above them.

The corpse stood and began to walk, its free hand digging into a new pocket and the first gun falling on the floor beside Crockett. Brandishing a second weapon, the blind corpse fired twice again and ran through the open door, momentarily knocked off its feet when the next blasts shook the ground. But it was a determined apparition, rising once more and breaking into a run; and Crockett sat up for no other reason than to keep watch on what seemed to be the most unexpected, incredible sight of his sheltered little life.

From behind, a voice said, "Help me, my friend. My Crockett."

He turned, and the fighting corpse was forgotten.

A spider as wide as a dinner plate rose high as it could, on six jointed black legs. The body was thick and solid, fashioned from some tough

species of bioceramic alloy. A mouth built only for speech was in front, and with a familiar voice, it said, "I will pay you . . . all I have left . . ."

"Doom?" the human muttered.

"All that remains of my wealth, yes."

Crockett had heard about such tricks: Organisms in the most dangerous circumstances would peel off their bodies, and sometimes even the bone or gelatin surrounding their living minds. Then their minds were secured inside a lifeboat, tough and temporary, able to weather all but the worst abuses.

"What do you want?" Crockett asked.

More blasts peppered the slope, followed by the sizzle of a second plas-matic bolt.

"I must reach the lake—"

Crockett interrupted. "You want to get to the Luckies, don't you?"

"I have no help but yours," said the spider, with feeling.

"And if I don't?" he had to ask.

"I apologize, but these ladies are professional murderers," Doom warned. "And since you are a witness to their attempted crime—"

Another blast, higher up the slope this time.

Crockett snatched the alien gun and stood.

"My friend—?"

"We aren't friends," Crockett spat.

"But you will help me?"

"Yeah, that too," he promised. "I'll help both of us, if I can."

## 5

**S**ome visitors to the hamlet didn't require local guides. Diplomats representing various distant worlds had received permission, or they were scientists intrigued by the robust biosphere. But a few souls had no obvious qualifications. They were peaceful, profoundly focused individuals who preferred not to ride the cable car to the ridge, but instead would walk the steep trails, investing time and some effort into the last moments of normal life.

The hamlet residents might discuss their fate, but not often and rarely with much feeling. Free sentient entities could do any fool thing they wished, so long as no one else was hurt. And besides, there was always the chance that somebody would come looking for those who were lost, and there was money to be made from that very peculiar work.

One day, a human woman arrived on the tram. She was handsome and queenly and reserved and alluring. Rumors swirled about her desires, and Crockett managed to put himself in the position where he could impress an old lady with his professionalism and strong back.

She hired him, promising ten days of constant labor.

The first six days were spent loading the cable car with equipment that was lifted to the end of the line, then carried over foot worn trails, up to a rocky shelf on the far side of the caldera's ridge. The lake lay below them.

In the middle of winter, the deep water was barely warm enough for a bath, and it was spectacularly clear—a vertical realm filled with swimming shapes and flexing tendrils and the delicate, rib-like reefs where the communal Luckies enjoyed their easy times. Alien eyes covered nearly a quarter of the lake surface—thin, profoundly black disks made of light-sensitive neurons. They were lidless and unsleeping eyes, missing nothing that happened in the sky. By comparison, the woman's telescope was tiny, feeble, and perhaps even laughable.

Crockett laughed, but only when he reached home again.

Six full days were needed just to bring the pieces of the machine up to the high shelf, and another three days were spent standing in the brutal cold. The two worked in clumsy partnership, assembling and calibrating all the components and photon traps and the generator and its backup, struggling to meet the deadline that came on that last, tenth day. By then, the Luckies' weak sun had dropped beneath the illusionary horizon. A sky that had been suffused with soft purple tones fell into total darkness. Bright stars became brilliant, and thousands of unseen stars leapt out of the night. Glancing through the viewfinder, Crockett saw more detail than he had ever imagined possible. Each one of those minuscule stars was nothing more, or less, than a colorful mark painted on an otherwise invisible ceiling. And not painted once, but endlessly—a succession of tiny, intense images that if examined closely would reveal flares and sunspots and perhaps the occasional, endlessly consistent transit of worlds. And by the same inherent logic, each tiny round patch of blackness, smaller than a bacterium, was itself imbued with a thorough, finely rendered map, invisible oceans and mountains and twisting rivers running unseen between the two.

Always, the Luckies had to feel comfortable with their sky.

Crockett understood that logic, the alien mind . . . or at least he accepted the creatures' strangeness well enough to make them familiar, and in the fashion of a tapestry hung for too long on a wall, forgettable.

But his client didn't care about stars, bright or otherwise.

The vagaries of orbits had brought both of the outer moons into view. The outermost moon was sold to humans as payment for passage on-board the Great Ship. Colonists had rapidly terraformed the prize, transforming the ice crust into a blue ocean where millions of humans lived in floating cities and submerged cities and walked along beaches designed to be idyllic. Sometimes, in a mocking mood, Crockett would tell neighbors, "I wouldn't mind visiting that place." And everybody laughed, enjoying his weak humor even as they secretly wondered how walking that sand would really feel.

The nearer moon was half-full, and following the orbit of its namesake, on that day it reached opposition with the Luckies' home moon. The two celestial bodies couldn't have been closer. That icy neighbor was as large as possible, big as a big palm riding on the end of the short arm; and while it wasn't near enough to touch, at least it managed to look genuine and immediate, even when the eyes knew it was a smear of light.

A picture.

Nothing.



Except for his presence as an Honorable Guide, Crockett wasn't needed anymore. His client told him to step away, which he did willingly. For the next few hours, he staved off boredom by watching the caldera's lake. He studied the banded face of the old brown dwarf. Then with eyes closed, he imagined sleeping with this woman with whom he had shared effort and time and very little else.

The telescope was a broad, blunt machine focused hard on one of the cities of that nearby moon. With limited success, Luckies had colonized their neighbor's natural hot springs. Starships had brought other species, and later, the Great Ship brought even more. With the available resolution, the woman found a certain building, and when the light was good, she could make out a solitary figure standing on its roof. Then with a laser barely strong enough to throw its beam across a very large room, she sent a message, and after the appropriate delay, she received an answer that made her laugh quietly and then sob to herself.

Hours passed while she conversed with that dead person.

Crockett never learned who it was. Human? Alien? Was it a former lover, or just some lost friend? In a roundabout fashion, he made inquiries. But his client pretended not to hear him, and later, she mentioned that perhaps this was none of his business, thank you.

"I was just curious," he muttered. "Sorry, never mind."

In the Luckies' sky, no object was so thoroughly rendered as that neighboring moon. Knowledgeable voices claimed that not even the Ship's captains had the computing power that was being focused on that one illusionary body. Every city on the visible hemisphere was real, as were the cities on the far side: How else could the entire organic world be maintained? Each city had its population, and every citizen had a name and address and life and loves, including the fierce hates and passionate disinterests and all the other untidy, inelegant, and wonderful hallmarks of existence: Some self-declared experts claimed the vast imagery was so thorough that every mote of dust had its own label. Every snowflake knew its place; every gust of wind had its story. And that was why the Luckies could demand fortunes from those souls who were desperate enough or odd enough to have themselves killed: Killed so those strange mite-sized creatures could tear their minds apart, revealing every memory, every cherished secret, and then slather whatever they learned to the plaster on their busy ceiling.

Finished at last, the woman turned away from the telescope and wept again.

When her grieving was finished, she called Crockett over, and, together, they dragged the telescope to the edge of the shelf and gave it one shared push. An apparatus worth plenty tumbled into the warm water. And alien bodies instantly tore it apart—the rare metals and hyperfibers most likely part of her payment.

Together, the two strangers returned to the cable cars.

In silence, they rode back down to the hamlet—a tiny place full of warm homes and real people and organisms that were as good as any person.

Only in the station, at the end, did Crockett suggest to his client that



she might enjoy an evening spent with him. He meant sex, but he didn't say it. He meant to sound friendly and fun, and that was exactly how he came across. But she reacted instantly, decisively. A knife in the belly wouldn't have made her straighten up any faster, and with a tight, small voice, she asked, "Why would you ever think such a thing would be half-possible?"

He blinked, too startled to react.

"You're the one living a dream," she informed him.

This was not the first time, nor was it the last, that Crockett wondered if perhaps he didn't know women quite as well as he believed.

6

The two AIs were sitting together in the false-forest, in the middle of the main path, a thin coat of new snow obscuring their faces and their high functions removed and burnt to ash.

Six mechanical legs had wrapped themselves around Crockett's waist, the tip of each leg fused with its mate. Doom was riding him, the spidery body snug against the small of his back. The lifeboat weighed almost nothing, and sometimes it was almost possible to forget about the alien. Crockett could run naturally, long legs slicing through the deep fresh snow. He carried the bomb-throwing gun in one hand, then the other. There were moments when he almost forgot why he was running. Then the plasma weapon discharged somewhere in the Luckies' forest, and he heard fire and saw a flash of light, followed by the stink of burning wood.

"Who are they?" Crockett whispered.

"Hired killers."

"I know. I mean . . ." What did he mean? "They were security officers. Ours. Children, nearly—"

"They aren't young," the alien warned.

"Okay." Crockett was following the narrow, unpopular trail that he once used to carry the telescope to the high shelf. "The women aren't what I guessed. But I want to know—"

An explosion shook snow off the gray roots.

"My body has expired," Doom reported. Then with a curiously buoyant joy, he added, "But it did earn us time and distance."

Crockett stumbled.

"Careful," said his companion.

"I want to know," Crockett managed as he stood. "Who hired your killers?"

"My enemies."

"Well, yes . . ."

"If you learned their identities, perhaps you would know too much."

"So what are you?" Crockett asked. "And why did you deserve this—?"

"I am nobody, and I did nothing." The alien adjusted his grip as the trail began to climb. "Nobody and nothing," Doom repeated.

Crockett glanced at the weapon. Could his hands use this thing?

"I boarded the Great Ship to escape my enemies."

"That happens a lot," Crockett agreed.

"But they came with me, my enemies did. They hate me that much."

From behind and far below, a woman's voice shouted out a single word:

"Tracks."

Crockett muttered, "Shit," and ran harder.

"Eight centuries, I have been onboard this wonderful starship. I have made a habit of regularly changing identities and habits. But my enemies always find me, and three times before, they have sent agents to put an end to me."

"Go to the captains," Crockett suggested. "Can't they help?"

Silence.

"They won't, will they? Why now? Are you some kind of criminal?"

"If I was," the alien pointed out, "then my enemies would invite the captains' aid in finding me."

Probably so.

"This is a private, difficult concern."

The trail angled to the right, flattened and then lifted steeply again. A single plasmatic round passed overhead, near enough that the air warmed, and with the brilliant yellowish glare, the surface of the snow turned to fresh vapor.

"I am sorry to involve you, my friend."

"We aren't friends," Crockett gasped.

"Of course not."

"Will this be the end?" he asked. "If you reach the Luckies . . . will it put an end to everything. . . ?"

"I believe so."

"Because you'll be dead."

Silence.

How much farther? Crockett had walked this path thousands of times, but never in these awful circumstances. Never this fast, and never this slow. He felt as if he was in a nightmare, the snow growing deeper for no reason other than to fight every stride. He was aching and sick with fear, and sometimes he caught himself wondering what would happen if he just dropped the damned bug. It would probably crawl after him, he guessed. So then he'd turn and give the creature a good finishing kick.

Crockett tried to sprint, stumbled and slid backward a few meters.

As he struggled to rise, the legs around his belly tightened. "No," said Doom. "Remain where you are."

Crockett could taste the steam rising off the boiling lake—a rich, acrid scent created by shredded organics and heavy metals. "Why?" he muttered.

"Here you are invisible to them."

"But they're coming," he pointed out. "They're going to find us—"

"Please wait."

The runaway terror had returned.

A very tiny eye lifted high above the spider's body. "Below us stands a substantial rooting body," Doom explained. "He is parabolic in shape, and much taller than any of his neighbors."

"What do you want?"

"With both hands, grasp the weapon's trigger mechanism. Yes, that is the technique. In a few moments, I would like you to sit up and aim at that large root . . . and please, twist the trigger until the magazine is empty . . ."

"Will that stop them?"

"With luck, you will earn us more time," Doom replied.

Crockett took a deep breath, fighting to clear his head. "Letting the Luckies kill you . . ." he began. "Is that a reasonable solution. . .?"

"I am living in death now," the creature pointed out. "By doing this, I will simply be exchanging one afterlife for another."

Crockett breathed again.

"Now, my friend. Turn. Shoot. And then, please run. . . !"

7

Explosions tore apart the dead wood, and secondary charges ignited the airborne chunks and splinters, creating a rolling blaze that pushed its way down the slope, melting and searing all that lay in its brilliant orange path.

Crockett threw down the empty weapon and sprinted uphill, his frantic shadow leading the way. For an instant, from out of the firestorm, he heard what might have been a single voice screaming in misery. Or it was random noise. Then the voice vanished within the boiling crackle of sap, and he reached the crest of the ridge and gratefully started down the other side.

In a few steps, there was no snow underfoot.

The air turned blacker and denser, choked with moisture and a miserable heat. A quick succession of hard shocks sprang from some deep, angry place. Crockett stumbled. He stood and then stumbled again. From his left came the ominous rumblings of a thick, newborn geyser. Finding his feet and balance, he warned, "The eruption's starting."

"Run," the alien kept advising.

"Where?"

"To the lake."

"But the eruption—"

"It has not arrived," Doom replied. "My saviors shared with me the moment of the Birth Catastrophe, and we have several minutes remaining . . ."

Crockett discovered that the air was less awful when he bent low, and that was how he ran—a clumsy pitched-forward stride—and when he could see nothing useful, which was most of the time, he would close his burning, tearing eyes, navigating by a mixture of feel and panicked memory.

The trail suddenly flattened out.

Here was the high rock shelf where he and that odd woman had assembled the telescope. But the sky was stolen away. Stars and the elaborate moons were hidden behind a growing flume, superheated vapors rising from the lake's center, lifting countless spores with them. Crockett took a step and coughed and managed two more steps before his windpipe began to scald. Then he paused, kneeling forward for what was supposed to be a brief, brief rest. But without oxygen, his body was descend-

ing into emergency metabolisms. Energies were dipping, and his eyes refused to stop weeping, and when he tried to rise it was too soon, and he tripped and fell again, losing all sense of direction.

The spidery machine deployed more eyes.

"Let go of me and run," Crockett advised.

"Quiet," said Doom.

"I'm slowing you down," Crockett argued.

Then his companion yanked the jointed legs, threatening to cut his body in two. And very softly, Doom said, "One is with us. The tall one is here."

With both fists, Crockett wiped at his eyes. Then he forced the lids to open, but he saw nothing except for the perfect blackness. The universe was him and this apparition that refused to release him, plus nothingness without end or purpose, comfort or hope. But at least his anaerobic metabolisms were awake now. He had enough strength to stand, and from that new perspective, he realized that he could hear the boiling lake lying straight ahead.

He took three increasingly small steps, feeling for the edge.

Each motion caused Doom to pull his legs in close again, but the creature didn't offer so much as a whisper of advice.

With the third step, a new shape appeared before Crockett—a geometrical simple shape composed of dark lines joined together, each line moving slowly according to its own desires. Too late, he understood what he was seeing. The beautiful tall killer was standing directly in his path, probably fully aware of his presence and his hopelessness. Yet Doom chose that moment to speak again—in an abrupt, rather loud voice—telling his companion, "Run. Past her, and jump over the edge—"

"I'll die," he interrupted.

"My saviors will not let that happen. I promise."

Even if the alien was telling the truth—if the Luckies would willingly digest his brain and volunteer their computing power to let an extra illusion walk their nonexistent moon—this wasn't what Crockett wanted. Never. With both hands, he grabbed the encircling legs, hard tugs accomplishing nothing while he cried out, "Get off me. Drop!"

The alien refused.

Crockett sucked in the hot black air and screamed. "Here I am! I've got him here. Here!"

Doom pulled his legs close, crushing the human guts.

The tall girl stepped closer, and then she set off a floating flare that lifted several meters overhead, throwing a hard bluish glare across the black rock of the shelf. A transparent mask lay over her pretty face, allowing her to breathe slowly and naturally. As always, she looked like a supremely happy soul. With a warm joyful smile, she watched Crockett fighting with his companion. She seemed utterly amused by the situation. Without question, she had won, but why didn't she use the plasma gun riding in her long left hand? Then another figure emerged from the fumes—a short strong human, badly burnt but already beginning to heal.

The second killer said "Hello" to her partner.

She wasn't wearing a breathing mask. It was lost or destroyed, or maybe she didn't feel it was necessary anymore.

"I was waiting for you," the tall girl allowed.

"Thank you." That beautiful face had been destroyed, eaten to the bone by the firestorm. A sloppy mouth remained, withered lips and the stump of a tongue barely able to speak. "You almost made it," she managed, studying Crockett with a pair of freshly grown eyes. But she was speaking to the alien. She said, "Mr. Doom," and broke into a mocking laugh.

Too late, Crockett stepped toward the lake.

The tall girl had a second weapon—a tiny kinetic gun that neatly shattered both of his shins, leaving him sprawled out on his right side.

"You want your friend pulled off?" the tall girl asked.

The short girl fell to her knees. For a moment, she teased Crockett with that brutalized mouth, threatening to give him a dry, sooty kiss. Then she reached around back and used a special tool, and the machine-spider released its grip and fell helplessly onto its back.

"Make sure," the short girl advised.

The tall girl deftly opened the armored carapace, and what she saw made her pause. Crockett couldn't see the lovely face against the glare directly overhead, and perhaps she couldn't see anything well enough because of her own shadow. Then she rocked backward, letting the full light of the flare fall into the cavity—a cavity designed to carry a mind that was most definitely missing.

"The crafty shit," the tall girl muttered.

"A second lifeboat," her partner muttered. "There must have been, and I didn't notice—"

"You didn't," the tall girl agreed testily.

From the beginning, Crockett realized, he had been carrying an empty vessel—a package of programs and contingencies that was masquerading as a poor miserable soul facing death.

"He lied to me," Crockett complained.

The short girl laughed at him, or herself.

"The shit," said the tall girl once again.

Then the two of them traded glances, and the short girl climbed to her feet and moved out of the way. And her partner said, "Nothing personal," and pointed her plasma gun at Crockett's cowering face—

The empty spider flinched and leaped high.

When it detonated, the six long legs were driven hard into both women, cutting through spines and bones, leaving them in mangled wet piles . . . and allowing Crockett just enough time to crawl into a crevice where he wedged his own battered body, the next moment or two spent thanking his own considerable luck.

And with that, the caldera exploded.

Watching the eruption from below, various neighbors recalled having seen three friends accompanying clients to the ridge. Did they return in time? No? Well, incidents like this always seemed to happen,

and usually more bodies were involved. But neither the hottest water or deepest snow could kill, and from experience, they understood that it was best to wait several days, letting the new mountain build itself to where its foundation was stable and as predictable as could be hoped for.

The deep lake continued to explode upwards, and the thick white steam cooled, falling again as waves of snow and delicate formations of ice. Gas bubbles and volcanic soot complicated the complex, ever-changing layering. No two mountains were ever the same, and this particular eruption built the tallest peak in memory—a lofty, single-vent ice volcano that looked as if it was willfully reaching for the ceiling, and with that, trying to touch the painted stars.

Steam was still pouring upwards when the rescue party found the burnt-out cable car, and shortly after that, the two dead AIs.

What had seemed routine was not.

More volunteers joined in the desperate efforts. Portable heaters cut half a dozen tunnels up the ridge and down the other side. Two more days passed before the next body was discovered: One of the temporary security officers, horrifically maimed but conscious enough to point at her colleague. "It was the alien," she managed to say with her frozen, half-healed face. "Watch for him, and be careful," she warned. Then someone asked about Crockett's whereabouts, and she paused for a moment, in thought, before directing them toward the shelf's edge, into the scorching depths of the caldera itself.

"The poor bastard," was the general consensus.

The other officer's body was dug out of the ice, and both victims were carried back down to the hamlet; and after a full day of intense medical care, the two ageless women got out of bed and grabbed each other by the hand, and a few moments later, they walked to the tram and rode away, leaving the habitat for places unmentioned.

A few hours later, one of the local vespers was hired to bring a married couple into the temporary ice tunnels. It was the woman, Quee Lee, who discovered Crockett's mangled body. With her husband's help, she dragged the lucky man into a convenient chamber. The vesper wanted to leave Crockett there and chase after help. But the humans decided to feed the man their modest dinners, and by keeping their patient warm and comfortable, it took only a few hours for him to recover to where he could stand on his own and walk slowly.

Crockett told them what had happened. He claimed that he wanted to go home immediately, but at the last moment, standing inside an empty car, he had a sudden change of mind.

"But I wish to leave now," the vesper snapped.

"I'm staying here for a while longer," said Crockett. Covering his head with a makeshift cap, he turned to his saviors, adding, "You're welcome to walk with me."

"What's the fee?" asked the husband, with a suspicious tone.

"Perri," his wife snapped. "Does it matter—?"

"For nothing," said Crockett. Then he smiled weakly, adding, "For the fun of it. How would that be?"

Tourists were exploring the new landscape—a giant gray-white dome of ice and air pockets and vantage points that would never exist in quite this way again. In another few weeks, the residual heat of the eruption would begin melting the mountain's bones. Small quakes and a few large ones would cause spectacular avalanches. Eventually the caldera would fill with slush and dirt and the sleeping Luckies too, and the lake would be reborn, and a civilization that was already ancient when Earth was ruled by single-celled life would gracefully begin all over again.

But for this particular moment, three humans could walk safely on the face of the mountain.

Again, Crockett told his story.

Slowly, carefully, Perri and Quee Lee asked little questions, forcing him to explain those points that were hardest to explain. The sun was down, as it happened. And the nearest moon had risen just an hour ago—an almost full circle of ice and warm villages and unreal cities and teeming millions. Assuming that he had reached the lake, Doom was living there now. Or at least some elaborate bottle of intelligence, with his name and identity, believed that it was living on that spot of light cast up on that finite sky.

"He isn't safe," Crockett muttered.

His companions listened patiently.

"His enemies . . . they won't stop just because of this . . . inconvenience . . ." A keen sorrow ran through the voice. Quietly, he said, "One year from now, or in a thousand and one years . . . somebody will pass through the hamlet, pretending to be like all the others who want the Luckies' tricks. The stranger will want to make his family rich, or maybe he won't have anything else to lose. The reasons don't matter. All that counts is that he'll walk up a trail and surrender his body to the aliens, and the Luckies will put him up on that moon there, and in another year, or fifty thousand years, he'll finally accomplish what he was hired to do." Crockett sighed, gesturing at that patch of cold light. "One way or another, Death is going to find its way there."

"It's the same for all of us," Perri whispered.

Crockett glanced at him. For a moment, his face twisted with genuine horror; but then the horror slowly faded, replaced by a strange, bright expression that looked like pure wild joy.

During the eventual cable car descent, Crockett asked his new friends if they often traveled around the Great Ship.

"Sometimes we stop wandering," Quee Lee replied with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Name your hundred favorite destinations," said Crockett. Then he added, "The warm, bright places, I mean. Alien and human both."

Perri quickly supplied a list of more than a hundred habitats.

The car slid into its berth, and Crockett thanked both of them for everything, and then he walked out of the station, past his home and the little party of friends and neighbors who were waiting inside to surprise him . . . past them and out of the hamlet entirely, stepping onto the first tram available, and without one backward glance, leaving behind the unreal for those things that truly had to matter. ○



## CENDRILLON AT SUNRISE

Creeping out from her ash-bed  
In the earliest dawn  
She stands, grime-streaked,  
Wringing her rag in her hands,  
To see the dew-gilded unicorns  
Slipping away between the trees.

Hearing her name called harshly:

"Cendrillon! Now!"

She turns back to the dark house.

Glancing up at the clear sky

The rays of the sun-flash

Catch gold wings of a dragon's plunge.

And though the links of her fetters clink

She knows in her secret heart

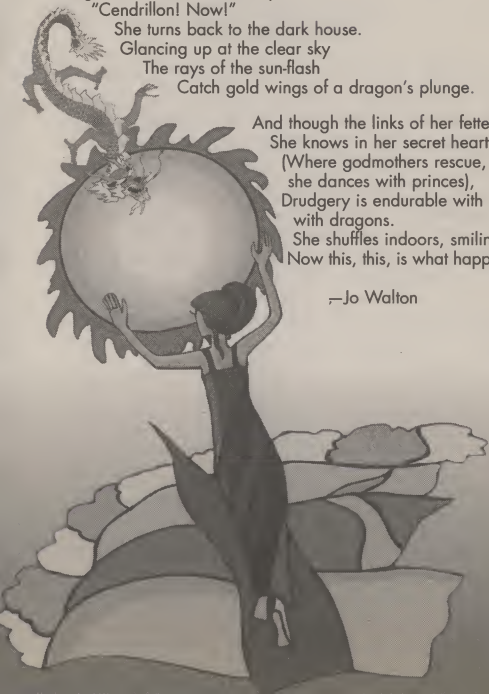
(Where godmothers rescue, where  
she dances with princes),

Drudgery is endurable with sunrise,  
with dragons.

She shuffles indoors, smiling.

Now this, this, is what happiness is.

—Jo Walton



# MY HEART AS DRY AS DUST

Kim Zimring

In the course of obtaining an MD/PhD degree, Kim Zimring previously focused her writing on science fact, particularly in the area of cardiac allotransplantation. After graduating and discovering the joys of producing work that required neither figures nor chi-squared analyses, she turned her attention to submitting science fiction. In her first story for us, she details the horrifying consequences of a deeply disturbing solution to a deadly problem. By the time this tale comes out, it will be the author's third story in print; her first appeared in the April 2007 issue of *Analog* and her second in this year's *Writers of the Future Anthology*, Volume XXIII.

**B**y the time they reached the execution grounds it was no more than nine AM and yet already so hot Adija could scarcely imagine how badly the noonday sun would burn.

She had every intention of finding out, however. She was not going to die this fine morning, no matter what the sentence of the court. It was wrong, unfair, unjust, *unthinkable* that she should be put to death.

Besides, her lawyer had delivered and she'd had one unguarded moment to inject the implant and then discard the cartridge. It sat now, a hard knot just behind her left ear, nearly indistinguishable from the lumps and bumps her Ghanan jailors had given her every time the UN looked away.

The stadium, on arrival, had been something of a disappointment, to be honest: smaller, dingier, and in every way less impressive than the place she had seen once as a child. Still, this time Adija got to enter through the

central gates, the shadow of the concrete arch cool and deep above her as she passed within.

She raised her head as they emerged on the other side, wincing as the implant burrowed a little deeper, searching for the internal jugular. The guards didn't seem to notice; they just led her out into that wide and sandy place where sometimes they killed the enemies of the state and sometimes they played soccer.

Usually when they had a woman to execute they did it quietly, in the courtyard of the jail, and as for soccer—well, they never let them play. She was a pioneer, then, for setting foot on these hallowed grounds, even if it was an honor that would never be listed in her National Academy of Sciences biography.

That amused her enough to make her calm as she looked out across the crowd. They were packed dense, standing room only all the way down to the chain-link fence that lined the edges of the field. It formed an aisle and Adija almost expected a wedding chant as she processed in slowly with her guards, heading with ceremonial slowness for the gallows at the other end.

The spectators were silent, though, not even buzzing up until the moment she climbed the stairs and appeared atop the hanging stand. A cheer rang out then, a victory cry, as if someone, somewhere, had scored a winning goal.

At that, Adija thought she might pass out. The wood was smooth beneath her bare feet and she wished for a moment it was rough, as it seemed too slick for her to keep her balance.

The hangman gestured and she moved to the center of the stage. He was bare-faced, which surprised her somehow. Adija had pictured him as hooded, afraid to face the soon-to-be ghostmade with an open profile.

He gestured again, and she inched forward, her foot catching as she moved to stand atop the square outline of the trapdoor, just a little larger than herself. It made her almost sick to look down at it, to think of falling and all these people watching, not one of whom would catch her. It was still better to look down at that, though, than at the rope, dangling there, thick and rough, just at the level of her chin.

How did people face this without the reassurance of the implant? Without it she was sure that she would run screaming, would throw herself from the front of the gallows and try wildly to escape down that straight, clear path.

Or perhaps not. Now that she was up here it was as if she were the prima ballerina, the first voice in the opera. It would be hard, so hard, to go against the script.

And then the rope was around her neck. She had a moment's panic; the hangman looked just like her uncle—the same round face, the same trace of laugh lines around his eyes. Surely he was Dangbani, the same tribe as Adija, and she worried it would soften his heart, make him try harder for the quick neck-breaking death.

That was the only thing she truly had to fear; there was nothing the implant could do for the snapping of a spine.

The hangman moved behind her then, pulling her wrists together and binding them, one to the other. She disliked his touch, disliked all touch,

to be honest, which was something, someday, she might even choose to work on, but today she almost welcomed it—the bindings kept her from rubbing the space behind her ear, from giving in to the almost irresistible impulse to check that the implant was still there.

The hangman finished with her hands, straightened, and, still from behind, tightened the rope around her neck. It itched, first at the back of her neck and then around her whole throat as he cinched it in.

She had expected more, somehow. Speeches, maybe. Politicians ingratiating themselves with the crowd, offering the association of their faces with her death.

Nothing, though. Nothing but herself and the hangman and the vastness of the waiting crowd. Surely out there somewhere there were cameras, recording this for the pleasure of the continent and the ratings of the newsnets, but Adija couldn't spot them.

"Are you ready?" the hangman asked.

The sound shocked her nearly as much as the consideration. His voice was like her uncle's, too, low and resonant.

She nodded. Why not? As ready now as ever, and then the hangman stepped back and the trapdoor opened and the world jerked hard . . .

"Why did you do it?" her lawyer asked before he even sat down, the first time they ever met. Salierson, he said his name was, looking sharp and professional and completely out of place in the grime of the Ghanan National Police interrogation room.

"When I was a little girl, I thought I would be a witch when I grew up," Adija said, not quite answering the question, or at least not answering it in quite the way her lawyer wanted. "I lived in the Kpatinga witch camp and it was well known that girls who were exposed to that kind of evil influence often became witches themselves when they were older."

"And so you became a scientist instead?" Salierson pulled up a battered metal chair, brushing it off with two careful swipes before he took a seat. "Isn't that just the modern variant?"

Adija blinked, offended, but trying not to show it. She required his help, if not with the trial—that was a foregone conclusion—then with obtaining what she needed. Just one small thing, brought from her bags, and she could make it through this.

"I don't know how old I was when I first came to the camp," she said, pressing on, determined to win him over.

Six, maybe, she guessed, judging by the smallness of her hands compared to the thick biology text she remembered best. Like everyone, she knew the day of the week of her birth—she was a Thursday's child—but the year had always meant less in Ghana and so Adija had to estimate. Of what she remembered, though, this was always clear:

They had fled her village in the middle of the night on her father's motorbike, her granny-Nya clinging to her father and Adija clinging to her granny. A few of the boys had heard them running away and chased after, flinging rocks and curses. A sharp one had caught her in the middle of her back and she had felt it all the way to the camp, first as a stinging, then as a wetness, then as a sticky, pulling pain.

She knew why they'd had to run, too. Her Nya had killed a little boy, they said; he had seized for three days straight and then choked his way down into death, still jerking weakly. That was witch's work, clear as day, and soon the village realized it was her Nya who was the witch.

But her grandmother had a chance to prove her innocence. Right after they had arrived at the camp, with the sun still rising over the horizon, the Gambaraana witch-doctor had met them with his guinea fowl in hand.

There were a few huts in a circle and other girls there to help their witch-grannies, maybe ten of them altogether. Adija wanted to ask her father about them but she didn't think that she should ask a question like that right then. He looked sad and scared, and thin, too, she realized for the first time, as she stood beside him and saw him sideways on.

Later, she would remember that, and her mother's thinness, too. Nobody said HIV, ever, and for all Adija knew some other old woman had been blamed for their deaths and sent off to a witch camp or maybe killed outright. She never knew, just as she never knew if her father had left her there for her Nya's sake—her grandmother was too old to gather sticks for the fire or water from the well—or whether it was for Adija's sake alone, given the foreign aid that kept the camp alive.

Salierson frowned.

Adija stopped.

"Your parent both died of AIDS?"

Adija nodded. That was just the sort of thing she needed him to hear—so sympathy-inducing—but to come right out and say it—well, that wasn't the way that stories went in Ghana. If she were out of here, back in the US, or maybe in her lab in Singapore, she could put the story together like a proper research paper, with the abstract in the front. Here everything blurred in the heat and a simple, statistical decision turned back into a darker, weirder thing made of witches and blood and children gone forever wrong.

She never knew which way was right.

So she just kept going, weaving her way back into the tale until it felt as if she was standing there again, smaller than nearly everything except the guinea fowl itself.

The chief was saying a few words, but Adija didn't understand, even in retrospect. Some secret ritual language, she supposed now, some garbled nonsense that had acquired the patina of power over the generations. *Abra-cadabra*, the Gambaraana might as well have said, and then she remembered just how he had slit the guinea fowl's neck, gently, with a slice deep enough to kill but shallow enough to take a little time for the bird to die.

He dropped the fowl and it landed on its feet, then stumbled, one leg going out from under it just as a man's would, if his knee had buckled. Adija didn't think birds had knees, not exactly, and in any case the little chicken soon recovered, popping its wings out for balance.

It turned its head and looked right at her—maybe she was the only one small enough for it to see eye-to-eye with—and with that turn something pulled loose; the blood began to flow. It cocked its head, surprised, perhaps, just like Adija had felt surprised when the stone had cut her back, and for a moment she was afraid to move so much as a muscle, for fear

her back would rip open just like the little bird's neck, and both of them would gush their lives out on the sand.

But she couldn't hold still that long. She moved, and the bird moved too, flapping its wings this way and that as if it were dancing, with a dip and a twist and a steady drip of blood.

Adija leaned forward as if she could catch it, fix it, put it back right, and it leaned forward, too. It was too far away, though, and there was a hand on her shoulder besides. So she quit leaning and it kept going, until it keeled over and quietly expired, face down on the ground. A minute, maybe two, since its throat had been cut, and that was a quick death in this place.

A quick, decisive death. A thrill ran round the circle and Adija tried to remember what her cousins had told her, out by the well, about sorcerers and witches and how you knew their guilt. Face up or face down, that was how you knew, from the way the bird died, but which was which?

She didn't have to remember, though. People were already drawing back from her Nya, though why they would do that if the rest of them were witches too was beyond Adija. The bird had died face down and they said that meant her grandmother was guilty of witchery, plain as day.

The Gambaraana sent a girl scurrying off and she came back with a portion in a lopsided clay bowl. It was thick and red, Adija could see when she stood on tiptoes to peer over the rim. It looked as if it had been standing out for a while too, because there was something small and kicking near the surface, some insect that had fallen in and was close to its own drowning death.

But they made her grandmother drink it, flies and all, and she was sick for three days straight. It was supposed to make her safe to live with, to bind her power, but Adija wondered if she would have to stay here if her Nya died. Adija hadn't killed anyone with witchcraft, after all, and maybe three days in this place wasn't enough to taint anyone. But her grandmother lived and her parents died and time passed and finally she was thirteen, still living in the Kpatinga witches' camp.

Adija stopped; then swallowed.

Salieron tipped his head to the side. The room was hot; no air conditioning to waste on wicked things like her. The sweat on his temple changed direction as his head tilted, slipping sideways instead of down. "That's a pretty rough story," he said, finally.

He stood up, then smiled. "Not the worst I've ever heard, though I am sorry about your parents."

He said a few more things—none of them reassuring—and left, smoothing his suit down as he left, one hand after the other.

Adija stared after him, long after the door had shut. Maybe she should get a different lawyer? There had to be someone, somewhere, who would bring her the implant from her bags—there were factions out there who thought she was a hero.

Of course, it had to be a lawyer, to be approved to see her, and most of her supporters consisted of highly reasonable scientists, along with some eminent statisticians.

And on the other hand, she could easily end up with someone worse. The world was currently full of her . . . detractors.

That was the way she chose to think of them. It was as good a word as any for people who thought lynching was too good for her and that a trial was a slap in the face to all their suffering.

She understood that, too. She had, after all, killed more than eighty million people.

Salierson was back the next day, though, escorting her to court with a solicitousness that reassured. She'd looked over his resume again; there was no reason to suspect that he was against her *a priori*.

The courtroom was packed, unsurprisingly, wall to wall humanity in the spectator rows. It smelled of stale sweat compressed into too small a space, exuded and reabsorbed and then exuded once again.

The first witness was the chief of the Singapore biotech company that she'd worked for. It felt strange to see him outside of his bright, steel-edged office; he seemed skinned and scared in the natural light of day.

Still, he testified clearly, if quickly, RetroVax had developed a novel approach to overcoming HIV. The only natural immunity to HIV so far had been found in people who lacked the CCR5 receptor. Therefore, the company had developed a way to knock out CCR5. Presto, natural immunity.

The prosecutor paused and nodded wisely, as if he really understood, and cut to pictures from the vaccine trial as they went. The unlucky 10 percent, of course, in close-up: bodies swollen, abdomens tight with fluid, blood trickling from a nose or mouth.

Adija closed her eyes. She couldn't watch it all again. She'd hated it as much the first time through, but it didn't change the math.

Salierson rose, looking neat as ever, and his defense was good. What was a 10 percent risk when 100 percent of people with HIV died, and decades of promises of Western medications had always, always come to nothing? Weren't those deaths just as bad? Shelving the treatment had everything to do with Western scourges—liability and lawsuits and tanking stocks—and nothing to do with African ones, like an actual disease.

It didn't seem to matter.

The chief left without meeting her eyes. It wasn't so much the deaths, he'd said back when they'd argued about the company's decision. It was the liability.

A little less smart and a little more savvy, he'd said. Couldn't be a scientist without understanding legalities just as well as you did litigation. Did she want to end up in jail for criminal negligence?

Want, no, Adija thought, letting her gaze sink back to the defendant's table in front of her as they let him go.

Need, maybe, if it meant doing what was right.

Besides, in the end, the only person in the room she needed on her side was the one next to her, her lawyer. Just one person, that was all she needed to convince, to get out of this alive.

"My wife died from your cure," Salierson said conversationally, when they were back in the interrogation room. "She didn't even have HIV, did you know that?"



Adija sat, and didn't answer. What could she say? That it didn't matter, when more lives were saved than lost?

She turned it over in her head regardless. "Do you think that makes it worse?" she said finally. "That the ones with HIV deserved to die more than your disease-free wife? Because they had done something wrong and she hadn't?"

"It *means* that if you hadn't come along, she would still be alive, that's what it means."

That sat between them for a while. Adija would have apologized, if that had felt right, if she were less sure that she had done what was right.

"I should get another lawyer," she offered in the end. "You didn't disclose that before. It's a conflict of interest, at the least."

Salierson smiled, almost sweetly. "Eighty million dead? Who *hasn't* got a conflict of interest?"

Adija considered her response, considered protesting—hundreds of millions more saved—once again. Instead she said, "I think you did a good job in court today." It was true; Salierson obviously hated her on some level but he hadn't compromised his profession.

"I know about the man you killed." Salierson shifted in his chair, almost awkwardly.

Adija looked up, puzzled. "The" hardly covered it when you had released a re-engineered adenovirus that brought a 10 percent mortality rate along with its cure for HIV.

"The Gambaraana's son. The first man that you killed," Salierson said, persisting.

"Why do you want to know about that?" Adija asked. That had been so long ago, and so justified, that it barely registered in her memory.

"Did you think he deserved to die?"

Adija cocked her head and looked at him. "Yes." She paused, then went on, unsure where this was going. "What do you know about it?"

Salierson shrugged. "By the testimony—completely under the radar and paid for anonymously, you may either be relieved or completely unmoved to hear—of one of the aid workers, you murdered him."

Adija stared, then tried not to. This mattered to Salierson, obviously, though she couldn't fathom why. "I'm not on trial for that, am I?"

"And you never will be," Salierson said. "Humor me. I just need to know what happened."

Adija brought her hands up from her lap, rested them on the table. She preferred not to think of her time in the camp, had always preferred to think of tomorrow instead, but her tomorrows were potentially becoming very small.

Besides, she had already opened her past once to try to influence this man—what was once more? Surely it was a good sign that he wanted to know; it meant, perhaps, that he cared, that he would bring her what she needed?

"Did you know that in Africa most men think that having sex with a virgin cures HIV?" Adija said, therefore.

Salierson blinked and almost seemed to soften, suddenly. "Is that what happened to you?"

The question almost shocked her. Even after all the years she had lived in America, before she had moved to Singapore for her postdoc, she had never become accustomed to that tendency to ask forthright questions, to pry so directly and unashamedly.

"No," Adija said honestly, wondering if, truly, it would be better if she said yes. "I wasn't a very pretty child and I wasn't docile either."

There were other girls in the camp, pure and sweet and easy to control, she remembered that all too clearly. "The Gambaraana's son, he started with my friend Elilia. It didn't work, of course. So very stupid. The aid workers told everyone, over and over and over again, that it didn't work that way."

"So he deserved to die? He was a rapist, maybe even a pedophile, and he had it coming?" Salierson said. "You could maybe convince me of that."

Adija shook her head, watching her lawyer's face, sensitive to the slightest twitch. "No. I killed him because he would have done it again and again. More of the girls would have been hurt and infected, pulled down with him."

Salierson snorted. "The dispassionate savior. Did they thank you for it?"

No. They hadn't. But they had sent her away, gotten her out of there when they realized who had found the root, the one they used in the ritual potion, the one that made the new witches so sick. She had slipped a triple portion in the Gambaraana's son's second flask, the one he would drink when he was already too drunk to think better about any strange, unnatural taste, and she had solved the problem for good when the aid workers would do nothing but stand around and talk about how terrible it was.

Salierson smiled. It was a small, commiserating type of smile, as if he knew exactly what she felt. He leaned forward, put his hand on top of hers where they rested on the table and she managed not to jerk her hand away.

"I need you to bring me something from my bags," Adija said. Now or never. "We both know what the sentence of the court is going to be and I can't face the execution without some help. I have a medication I brought with me. It's a, a kind of sedative."

Salierson didn't waiver. "No, it's not." He rubbed his hands once across the top of hers before he disengaged.

But he brought it to her anyway.

The fall, it seemed, lasted forever; an eternity of the gallows rushing past. Then the rope was biting deep, cutting, and Adija thought she felt blood trickle down her front. She kicked out, unable to stop herself, and her hands twisted inside the bindings, trying to free themselves and release her neck.

It went on, as endless as the fall, worse and worse with more and more pain until she thought she would lose her mind, if not her life.

That, finally, was what calmed her despite the pain. She was still alive.

She stilled her kicking with the greatest of effort, mind over body, forcing herself to become quiet, deathlike, but inside her heart was singing.

The implant worked, it worked, it worked. Even now it was producing oxygen, pumping it up into her brain, substituting for her lungs.

It had been developed for deep-sea divers and what was she if not a visitor to a strange and airless place? She had enough oxygen to keep herself alive for forty-eight hours, according to the specs, though they should cut her down in just a little while. A few moments more of torture was nothing, surely.

But, oh God, it hurt.

Her heart beat faster, though, despite the pain—innocent, innocent, innocent, it said. Face up and not a witch, said the oldest, most childish part of her. Soon they'd cut her down and take her to the morgue, and then—for who guards the dead?—she would rise and go.

They'd think she was a ghost, the ones who saw her, and they would run and never touch her. She could walk her way to freedom, and if it was their superstition that saved her now, then wasn't that only right?

But they didn't cut her down. They disassembled the platform from around her and then they took down the chain-link fence and let the crowd come in.

They weren't anything like she expected, now that she was hanging. They were quiet, awed almost, and they filed by, one by one or in families, and they spoke to her as they came. She heard their stories and they touched her.

They knew she wasn't dead, too. They felt her pulse and, misunderstanding, they called her witch. If she'd had words she would explain they had it backward, that she was face up, not down.

It didn't matter. She stayed there, hanging.

By mid-afternoon her heart had stopped. She kept on living; the implant's oxygen and supplementary glucose was carried on tiny nanite backs: no need for red blood cells or normal circulation.

It was an interesting point, though, a matter of debate, and she had found the answer. Even with sufficient oxygen, the constriction of the major blood vessels would lead to cardiac arrest. Too much pressure to push against continually; the venous congestion of the brain couldn't be ignored.

It would have merited a publication, maybe in *Blood or Circulation*.

It was the beginning of the second day before her lawyer came.

You knew, she would have said, if she could talk, if her throat weren't closed and her lips baked black. You knew what the implant did and you knew that they weren't going to cut me down, ever, and you let me do it anyway.

He came close and waited until the nearest group moved off. Privacy, just the two of them, for a moment, and as distant as the confessional, too: from above, where she hung, he couldn't meet her eyes.

"My wife didn't deserve to die," he said. He didn't seem angry though. He touched her leg, running his fingers down the length of it almost wonderingly.

*I didn't deserve to either*, she might have said, if her throat weren't sol-

dered shut. She still wasn't sorry, not for him, or for his wife, or even for herself. Disease bred poverty and superstition too and it would have kept on feeding the camps; whether or not she admitted that she hated all of them, she still thought it was the right thing to have done.

He left then and another man came up. This one was Ghanan and he talked to her in her first language, the one she had dreamed in before English had overwritten everything. He told her about his mother, who hadn't had HIV but had died from vaccine-induced liver failure, and about his youngest girl, who had also died directly from the cure. But then he told her, too, about his brothers and sisters who were saved. They had tried medications for a while, but there had never been enough money, and there never would be enough money to keep more than half of Africa alive, and that was a simple fact.

He petted her foot before he left, squeezing her toes with a firm, quick grip, and it was oddly comforting. His touch was warm, surprisingly, and she wondered if her legs were dead already. It wasn't unpleasant to feel so chilled, not in this sun; it was more as if she were hanging over a sweet, cool sea.

But she couldn't really see, and the rope distracted her, burning across her neck like a fine, thin cut. Not innocent, she thought, but not guilty, witchy, either.

Not fair, not fair, she thought, though maybe it was, she wasn't sure. She might have danced and dipped and struggled, but if you were the sacrifice, the guinea fowl, then face up or face down meant the same, she saw.

At that, she let the cold creep up and sank, a stone into the sea. ○

# Asimov's

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James Van Pelt's short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Talebones*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. The author's recently released novel, *Summer of the Apocalypse* (Fairwood Press), is a finalist for the Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award. You can find his website at [sff.people/james.van.pelt](http://sff.people/james.van.pelt) and blog at [jimvanpelt.livejournal.com](http://jimvanpelt.livejournal.com). James teaches English at Fruita-Monument High School and Mesa State College in western Colorado. His vivid new story deftly shows us . . .

# HOW MUSIC BEGINS

James Van Pelt

**H**ands raised, ready for the downbeat, Cowdrey brought the band to attention. He took a good inhalation for them to see, thinking, "The band that breathes together, plays together." Players watched over their music stands as he tapped out a barely perceptible four beats. Then, he dropped into the opening notes of "The King's Feast," a simple piece a ninth grade band might play at the season's first concert. But Elise Morgan, his best student, had composed variations for flutes and clarinets, added an oboe solo, and changed the arrangement for the cornets and trombones, so now new tonal qualities arose. Her neatly hand-written revisions crowded his score, a black and white representation of the opening chords, the musical lines blending effortlessly. Everyone on beat. Everyone on tune. At the state competition, they would sweep the awards, but this wasn't state, and they weren't really a junior-high band anymore.

Eyes closed, he counted through the bars. "The King's Feast" recreated a night at Henry VIII's court. Suitably serious. A heavy drum background carrying the load. Not quite a march, but upbeat in a dignified way. Someone in the French horn section sounded a bit pitchy. Was it Thomas? Cowdrey cocked his head to isolate it, but the individual sound faded, lost in the transition to the second movement.

He lived for this moment, when the sections threaded together, when the percussion didn't overwhelm or the brass blow out the woodwinds. He

smiled as he directed them through the tricky exit from the solo. His eyes open now, their eyes on him, young faces, raggedy-cut hair, shirts and blouses too small, everyone's pants inches short above their bare feet, he led them to the conclusion, slowing the saxophones down—they wanted to rush to the end—then he brought the flutes up.

Rhythm and harmony tumbled over the pomp and circumstance in Henry's court. The ladies' elegant dress. The courtiers waiting in the wings. The king himself, presiding from the throne, all painted in music. Cowdrey imagined brocade, heavy skirts, royal colors, swirling in the dance.

The last notes trembled, and he held them in hand, not letting them end until his fist's final clasp cut them off. He was the director.

Aching silence. Someone in the drum section coughed. Cowdrey waited for the lights to flicker. They had flickered after the band's first performance here, and they'd flickered again after a near perfect "Prelude and Fugue in B Flat" six months ago. Tonight, though, the lights stayed steady. Behind the band, the long curved wall and the window that circled the room holding back the brown smoke on the other side were the only audience. "The King's Feast" concluded the night's performance. Cowdrey signaled the players to their feet. Instruments clanked. Sheet music rustled. He turned from the band to face the other side's enigmatic window and impenetrable haze. Playing here was like playing within a fish bowl, and not just the shape either. He bowed, and the band bowed behind him. Whatever watched, if anything, remained hidden in the roiling cloud.

"Good performance, Cougars. Leave your music on the stands for the section leaders to pick up, then you may go to dinner. Don't forget, breathing practice before breakfast with your ensembles."

Chatting, the kids headed toward the storage lockers to replace their instruments.

A clarinet player waved as she left the room. "Good night, Mr. Cowdrey." He nodded in her direction.

"Night, sir," said a percussionist. "See you in the morning. Good performance."

The room cleared until Elise Morgan remained, jotting post-concert notes on her clipboard. Her straight black hair reached the bottom of her ears, and her glasses, missing one earpiece, sat crookedly on her nose. As always, dark smudges sagged under her eyes. She slept little. More often than not, late at night, she'd still be working on the music. "One of the French horns came in late again. I think it's Thomas. He's waiting until the trombones start, and it throws him a half beat off."

"I didn't notice." Cowdrey sat beside her. The light metal chair creaked under his weight. Several chairs had broken in the last few months. Just two spares remained. He wondered what would happen when players had to stand for their performances. "The band sounded smooth tonight. Very confident."

Elise nodded toward the window. "They're tuning the room. Maybe they're getting it ready for Friday's concert."

Cowdrey raised his eyebrows.

Elise pointed to the domed ceiling. "See there and there. New baffles. We've lost the echo-chamber effect you mentioned last week, and check out

my flute." She handed it to him. "At first, they just repadded them. Normal maintenance, but they've done other stuff too. It's a better instrument."

He held the flute, then tried a few fingerings. The keys sank smoothly. No stickiness, and the flute weighed heavy.

"Play a note," she said.

He brought the instrument to his lips, but even before he blew, he knew it was extraordinary.

"During the sixth grade, after I won state solos the second time, my parents took me to the New York Philharmonic. I met their first chair, and he let me play his flute. Custom made. Insured for \$50,000." She took the instrument back from Cowdrey and rested it on her lap. "It wasn't as good as this one is now. Maybe the Perfectionists are right."

Cowdrey frowned. Misguided students with wacky theories about how they could get home shouldn't be taken seriously.

"How's that?" Cowdrey shook the irritation from his head. He thought he would check the lockers after he finished with Elise. Were the other instruments being upgraded too?

"Maybe what they want is a perfect performance, then they'll let us go. Maybe Friday will be it." She looked up at the nearest window. A brown smoky wave swirled behind it, cutting sight to no more than a yard or so beyond the glass.

Cowdrey felt fatherly. She sounded so wistful when she said, "they'll let us go." He almost reached out to touch her arm, to offer comfort, but he held himself still. No sense in sending mixed signals. "I don't know why we're here. No one knows. They shouldn't get their hopes up. After all, what's a perfect performance?"

"Any sunset is perfect. Any pebble is perfect." She scuffed her bare foot on the immaculate floor. "Weeds are perfect, and so is a parking lot at the mall when the cars are gone and you can ride your bike in all directions without hitting anything." She sighed. "And open meadows where the grass is never cut."

Cowdrey nodded, not sure how to respond. She often reminisced about meadows.

Elise closed her eyes dreamily. "I found a pebble in my band jacket. Sometimes I hold it and think about playgrounds."

"Really?"

She looked up at him, then dug into her pocket. On her open palm, a bit of shiny feldspar the size of a pencil eraser caught the ceiling light. As quick as it came out, it vanished back into her pocket. She made another note on her clipboard. "The Perfectionists are getting pretty fanatical. Others heard Thomas come in late."

"The band will maintain discipline. If anyone has a problem, they'll talk to me. That's why I'm here."

Elise looked uncomfortable. "Are you sure? With Ms. Rhodes gone . . ."

Cowdrey glanced away from her to the empty chairs and music stands. "Ms. Rhodes will be missed, but the band can continue without an assistant director."

"I'm just saying . . . it's a lot for a single adult to handle."

He composed his face to meet her eyes. "The less we think of Ms. Rhodes, the better."

Elise shrugged. "If you want it that way."



"We have the section leaders. They have taken the responsibility." He smiled. "Half the time I think the band doesn't even need me. You all have become such strong musicians."

She wrote a last comment on her clipboard, then slipped it under her arm. "Not strong enough. Nowhere near. Today is Monday. If we don't clean things up by Friday, the Perfectionists could get scary."

"It's late." Without the rest of the band in the room, his voice sounded too loud and harsh. Truly, he could hear a pin drop with these acoustics. "I'll see you tomorrow, Elise."

"Have you thought any more about the wedding?"

"No. We're not discussing it."

Her lips pursed, as if she wanted to say something, but she put her finger to the bridge of her glasses to hold them in place, then stood. "I'll direct breathing practice for the woodwinds in the morning, if you'll take the brass. At least I can help that much."

Cowdrey nodded. In the beginning, after the first week's chaos settled down, Ms. Rhodes had led the woodwinds through their exercises. Rhodes, a somber thirty-year-old who wore padded-shoulder jackets and seldom smiled, would meet Cowdrey outside the practice rooms. He'd hand her the routine he'd written up the night before. She'd study it briefly, then follow the players. In the last few months, she'd spoken about band-related issues, but nothing else. Conversation stopped. He didn't know how to broach another subject. The last time he'd tried, he had said, "How are you holding up?" She'd looked about like a wild bird for a second, as if she heard something frightful, but her face smoothed over and she said, "To improve rhythms, hone intonation, and create dynamic phrasing, we must improve breathing. All music begins with a good breath." Red circled her exhausted eyes.

Lockers lined the hallway outside the performance hall. A cornet rested in its shaped space in the first one. Cowdrey took it out. It, too, had been improved. No longer an inexpensive junior high band instrument, the keys sank with ease; the horn glowed under the hallway's indirect lighting, the metal as warm as flesh beneath his fingers.

He returned the horn to its place before closing the door. Thoughtfully, he walked to the T-intersection. To his left, the students' rooms, their doors shut. To his right, the practice rooms, the cafeteria, and his own room. He trailed his knuckle against the wall, but as he turned to enter he noticed Ms. Rhodes's door across the hall was gone as if it had never existed in the unmarked wall. When did that happen? he thought.

As always, dinner and a water bottle waited in a box on his bed. For weeks after the band had arrived, the students had tried to catch the deliveries, but they never did. If students stayed in the room, the meals wouldn't come, so if they wanted to eat, they had to leave to practice or to perform.

Passable bread. Something that looked like bologna in the middle, but it tasted more like cheese. He washed it down with a couple of swallows. Only the water from the bottles was potable. The stuff from the showers smelled like vinegar and tasted bitter. He wondered about the pets he'd kept as a child, a lizard and two hamsters. Did the food ever taste right to them? Had he ever fed them what they needed or wanted? He rested the sandwich on his lap. Later, he looked down. His fingers had sunk into the bread, and the edges had grown crispy. He glanced at his watch. An

hour had passed. Room check! He walked the long hall past the kids' doors. At first he'd insisted on making sure the right students went to the right rooms, as if they were on an overnight for weekend competition, as if they stayed at a Holiday Inn, but so often he woke kids who had already gone to sleep that now he just listened at each door. Were they quiet or crying? The first week there had been a lot of crying, and they had come close to not making it. Being a band saved them.

That week was his toughest trial. Fright. Fighting. Despair. To end it, he took the only step he knew: he called for a practice, and they became a band again.

Cowdrey trod softly from door to door, pausing, listening, and moving on.

He stopped for an extra long time outside Taylor Beau's room. Was Liz Waters in there with him? Were they in Liz's room? Cowdrey rested his hand on the doorknob. No way they could be serious about a marriage. They were children, junior high students, not adults; under astonishing circumstances, to be sure, but band standards and school regulations glued them together. For all his years as director, Cowdrey lived by one rule: would he be comfortable with the band's activities if parents or school board members watched? This marriage talk did not fit.

No sound beyond the closed door. His hand tightened on the knob; he didn't turn it. Did he want to know?

Next he paused outside Elise's door. She wouldn't be asleep. She'd be looking over the day's notes, rewriting. Cowdrey shivered thinking about her brilliance. What must it have been like for Mozart's father when a three-year-old Amadeus picked out thirds and sixths on the harpsichord, when the father realized the son had surpassed him and would continue to grow beyond his comprehension and hope? But did Mozart eat and breathe music like Elise? Did he ever believe that music would take him home? Cowdrey didn't think so. Maybe at the end of Mozart's life, when the brain fevers wracked him, and he could feel death's hand on his neck. Maybe then he wrote with equal intensity.

Not many teachers ever had the chance to work with an Elise. If they did, they prayed they wouldn't ruin her vision, that they wouldn't poison her ear.

When he reached the hall's end, he turned and repeated the process back to his door. At first, he and Ms. Rhodes had done the room check together, then stood guard in the hall until the children quieted. After a few weeks, they had traded nights. Now, he patrolled alone. Perhaps Elise was right. Maybe it was too much for him to handle.

He sighed. The silent hall stretched before him. He felt his pulse in his arm where he leaned against the wall. Soon, his chin headed for his chest. Cowdrey jerked himself awake, walked the hallway's length two more times before admitting he had to go to bed. In wakefulness' last few seconds, head resting on the pillow, he imagined he heard doors opening, the stealthy pad of bare feet, and the hush of doors gently closing on clandestine liaisons. Could Taylor and Liz be a single case, or had he lost control? A tear crept down his cheek as consciousness flitted away.

In the morning, Elise met him in the hallway. "Here are the variations I told you about for the Beatles medley. Mostly I need the saxophones'

sheets, but I also syncopated the drums for 'Eleanor Rigby,' and reworked the trombone bridge into 'Yellow Submarine,' so I'll need their music too."

Cowdrey nodded as he took the scores. "Did you sleep?"

Elise made a check mark on her clipboard. She moved to her next item. "I thought if we told the sections to treat their breathing exercises this morning like they were all preparing for a solo, we might get better sound from them. Remember, you told us once we should breathe from the diaphragm, and if we missed it, to miss big. I think about that a lot." She smiled, made another check, then frowned. "Also, you need to drop in on Thomas. I heard a rumor." Her pencil scratched paper firmly. "Look, Mr. Cowdrey, the band is on edge. All they think about is music and getting out. To some, Thomas is a handicap. They need something else. A distraction." She made another check on her list, then, without waiting for an answer, snapped the clipboard under her arm before striding toward the practice rooms, a girl on a mission.

"Good morning to you, too, Elise."

Soon the hallway filled with sleepy kids. Cowdrey greeted them each in turn as they passed. Most smiled. He glanced at their eyes. The red-rimmed ones would be a worry, but they had been fewer and fewer as the weeks since their arrival turned into months. At first there had been nightmares, a reliving of the night they'd been taken. He'd had a few himself: the bus's wheels humming through the night, *Junior High Band Management* open on his lap, and then the growing brightness out the bus windows, the high screech that seemed to emanate in the middle of his head before the short soft shock of waking on the fishbowl auditorium's floor with their equipment and everything else from the bus scattered about. (No bus driver, though!) Those dreams had tapered off through the months. He thought, kids are resilient—if they have a structure, that is.

Thomas came by last. A short boy who played in the band because his parents told him it would look good on a college application, he'd never been an inspired musician, but he was competent enough. Thomas kept his head down as he passed. "Good morning," he mumbled.

"Can I speak to you a moment?" Cowdrey moved away from the wall to block his path.

"Sir." The boy didn't meet Cowdrey's gaze, but even his head held low couldn't hide the bruise that glowered on his cheek.

"How'd that happen?"

Thomas glanced up, frightened for an instant, then his expression went bland and unassuming. "I fell in the shower. Slipped."

The instruments tuning up in the practice rooms filled the silence between them.

Finally, Thomas said, "Look, I want to get away from here as much as the next person. If playing on pitch, on tune and to the beat is what it's going to take, then I'll do that."

Cowdrey heard the Perfectionists echo in Thomas's speech. "There is no such thing as a perfect performance, Thomas." He thought about Elise's perfect pebble. Perfect because there were no pebbles here, nor weeds or malls or bicycles. No families. Nothing but each other and that day's playing.

Thomas shrugged. "Yeah, well, maybe not, but I can be better. I don't want it to be my fault the lights don't flicker."

"We don't even know what that means, son. Flickering lights may not be their applause."

The boy's eyes revealed nothing, and for a moment he didn't appear seventeen at all. He looked adult and tired and cursed with a terrible burden.

"Thomas, if someone is threatening you or hurting you, I need to know about it. That's my job. You don't have to play solo."

Thomas studied the hallway beyond Cowdrey's shoulder. A few steps past them, the hallway branched to the auditorium with its enigmatic windows. "My mom told me once that the world is a big place, and I could become anything I wanted to, but it's not. It's no bigger than the people you know and the places you go. It's a small world here, Mr. Cowdrey, and I don't have any place to hide in it, so I'm going to go to the practice room to see if I can't get my act together a little better." He pushed past the director.

The director threw himself into the morning's work. Teaching is time management, he thought, and staying on task. He moved from student to student, checking intonation and technique. "It's not all about the notes," he said to a clarinet player. "Once you know the music, it's about feeling the sound from your own instrument and your section. The song becomes more about heart than head." The player nodded and replayed the piece.

For a time, mid-morning, Cowdrey sat in the practice room with the brass section. The leaders paced the group through their pieces, focusing on problems from yesterday's session. Each had Elise Morgan's suggestions to consult. Cowdrey watched Taylor Beau and Liz Waters, the numbers three and four chairs among the cornets. The couple wore matching silver crosses on chains around their necks. He wondered if they had given them to each other. Liz kept her red hair in a pony tail, and when she finished a long run of notes, her skin flushed, chasing her freckles to the surface. Taylor often played with his eyes closed, the music consigned to memory well before the other players. Although he wasn't first chair, the section elected him for solos frequently, which he played with lighthearted enthusiasm. The director thought about Elise's question on the marriage, and he remembered the duet Taylor and Liz worked up for the state competition. They played "Ode to Joy," and when they finished, they hugged. Now that he thought about it, he should have seen the budding relationship in the hug. You can't rehearse so often with the same person that you don't start having feelings about how they play. The breathing. The fingerings. The careful attention to each other's rhythm and tone. Harmonizing. Cowdrey shivered, thinking about music's sensuous nature.

The trombone section leader gave instruction. Cowdrey half listened while thinking about his first year in college, when he'd added the teaching certification program to his music major. Just for something to fall back on, he'd thought at the time. But when graduation came around, he'd found he liked teaching as much as he liked music, so moving into the schools didn't feel like settling for less. The kids in the room laughed, breaking Cowdrey from his reverie. The section leader was part way through an old band joke that Cowdrey couldn't remember the punchline for. The leader said, "So she dated a tuba player next, and her girlfriend asks how the date went. She

says his embouchure was big and sloppy. It was like kissing a jellyfish." Most laughed, even the tuba player. "So, she says she went out with a French horn player next. How'd the date go?" asks her friend, and the girl says he barely could kiss at all, his lips were so close together, but she liked the way he held her." A couple kids reacted right away, and ten seconds later, almost all laughed. Some looked embarrassed. "I hope that wasn't inappropriate, Mr. Cowdrey," said the section leader.

Cowdrey smiled. "Maybe you could go through those opening notes again. If you don't come in crisply, the back half flounders." He noticed Taylor and Liz held hands. Thomas, however, wasn't laughing. He clutched his horn close to his chest, his arms crossed over it like a shield. No one seemed to be paying special attention to Thomas. Whoever the Perfectionists were, they hid well. Thomas thought about Elise's suggestion that the band needed a distraction, something else to think about besides a perfect performance. Could that be a way to protect Thomas?

The section leader directed the brass back to the first movement. Pages turned. Instruments came up, and the group launched into the beginning measures. Cowdrey stepped back to watch and listen. They didn't look so young to him anymore. Beneath their long hair or ragged haircuts, their faces had lost the babyish look he associated with fifteen-year-olds. Just two years' difference, but he could see they'd changed. Their clothes strained to contain them. Their hands had grown so that no one stretched anymore to reach their instruments' keys. Their breath control had improved since they'd arrived, the improvement that came with maturity. A ninth grader couldn't hold a note the way an older musician could. A fifteen-year-old couldn't hit the high parts with the same confidence as these kids could.

How long would they stay here?

Cowdrey walked behind the players. The wall cooled his back when he rested against it. What existed on the other side? Rooms filled with the brown smoke that eddied beyond the windows in the performance hall? He tried to imagine what creatures lurked in the brown smoke. Tentacles? Claws? Amorphous blobs? Or did he lean against a metal shell, inches from interstellar space? Maybe they had arrived on the creatures' home world and an entirely alien landscape waited beyond. Maybe, even, they had never left Earth, a few steps from home, hidden for their captors' amusement. (What did they want?)

But the question remained, how long would they stay? What if they would never leave?

Cowdrey frowned. A veteran teacher had told him, "When you teach, your life becomes the kids and the classroom. If there's anything else distracting you, then you're not doing the job." Of course, another teacher, equally experienced, countered, "Teaching is what you do. Life is why you do it."

He left the practice room. Pulsing sound greeted him when he opened the door into the percussionists' area. Their eyes didn't leave their music, and at the place where the bass drums kicked in, with the snares beating out a complicated counter-rhythm, he could feel his heart's pounding change to match it. Watching their hands blur to follow the music, seeing

the vibrations from the instruments' side, he noticed for the first time how thick-wristed the drummers had become, like tennis pros who gained an over-developed forearm on their racket side, except for them both arms bulged. When Cowdrey had been in college, he went out to dinner with a long-time drummer. On a bet, the fellow had grabbed one table edge with his fingertips, and lifted it, drinks and dinner plates and all by the strength of his hands and wrists. "Years and years working a drum set, and look what it got me, a party trick." The drummer laughed.

Once again, Cowdrey saw that the kids weren't ninth graders any more. When it ended, the section leader turned to him. "I thought these changes in the backbeat Elise wrote were wonky when I saw them on the page, but once we got going on them, wow!" Others in the section nodded.

The morning unfolded. Session after session, the kids' growth struck him. They weren't in any real sense a school band anymore. They had evolved into something that had never existed in humanity before, because where before in human history had these conditions existed?

But it wasn't until he stood outside his room before lunch that he made up his mind. Elise turned the corner with her clipboard in hand, her notes for the day covering the top sheet. Instead of showing them to him, she stopped to look at the blank wall where Ms. Rhodes's door once had been. Clearly she hadn't noticed the disparity in the hallway. Elise touched the wall. For a second, Cowdrey worried she pictured what he had seen when he raised the nerve to go into Rhodes's room uninvited: the sheet twisted into a rope, the cloth cutting into her neck, the pathetic letters home she'd been writing since the first day they'd arrived.

Elise placed her palm flat on the wall where the door used to be. "It's adapt or die all the time, isn't it?"

Her crooked glasses made her look childish, but the top of her head stood almost level with his chin. He remembered when she'd been just a tiny seventh grader who handled her flute with an older musician's authority, but whose feet didn't reach the ground when she sat to play. Cowdrey knew then that Elise had become the band's heart. She drew the thread that kept them together so far—not his efforts, but hers. She held the late-night meetings with the section leaders to go over changes in music. She organized the informal ensembles. She had the energy others could draw on, including himself.

"Yes, it is." He took a deep breath. Cowdrey could feel the shift in his thinking happen. Suddenly, he wasn't a junior high band director. He was an older adult trapped with fifty competent young adults, if he could let them be that. If he could adapt to change. "Let's get them ready for the practice this evening, shall we?"

Elise raised her eyebrows.

That evening, Cowdrey took the podium. Under his hands, he held the music for the practice and his baton. Paper-clipped to the top sheet were his notes for areas to emphasize along with Elise's comments. The group fidgeted and chattered as they always did before practice. Cowdrey liked standing before the full band, when the day's work came together and he could measure the progress, and even though he hated the circumstances, he had to admit he'd never had a better performance facility. The



light. The sound. The way the space flowed around them. Only the smoky windows and the hidden audience jarred.

He picked up the baton. They looked at him expectantly. "Breathing first, Cougars. I'll count off the seconds. Inhale." He tapped eight seconds with the baton while they filled their lungs. "Hold." With metronomic regularity he tapped out twenty-four more beats. They exhaled for eight, relaxed for ten, and then repeated twice more. At the end, the percussionists finished their set-up and the band waited. Breathing exercises calmed them, put them into the right mind. In his classroom at the junior high, which he could barely picture now, he'd hung a banner at the front: ALL MUSIC BEGINS WITH A GOOD BREATH (AND DIES WITH A LACK THEREOF).

Now they were ready. "An issue has come up that I think needs to be addressed. As most of you know, Taylor Beau and Liz Waters have asked my permission to marry." Whatever whispering that might have been going on when he started the speech lapsed into silence. For an instance, Cowdrey pictured the school board and all the parents sitting in the back. What would they say at this announcement? Would they understand? He brushed aside the image, then plunged ahead. "I have thought about the request for a long time. Considering our situation and Taylor and Liz's characters, I think they would make a fine married couple."

Before the last syllable had time to fade, the band erupted into cheers and gleeful laughter. The attention at first focused on Liz and Taylor, who cried and hugged awkwardly from their chairs, their cornets still in hand, but soon Cowdrey saw a good number had surrounded Elise, shaking her hand and clapping her on the back. Cowdrey's jaw dropped. He had, in every sense, been orchestrated. Finally, in the midst of the uproar, Elise caught his eye and mouthed, "Thank you." He touched his forehead in rueful respect.

Thomas put his French horn on his chair, waiting his chance to congratulate the happy couple. A trombone player stood beside him, and they smiled as they chatted. It seemed as if it had been weeks since Cowdrey could remember Thomas looking relaxed. Cowdrey thought, a good decision and a distraction in one move. He smiled too.

Elise worked her way over to him. "We'll need a wedding march."

"I think Mendelssohn's is in my books. That would be traditional. Besides, it would be appropriate. He was seventeen when he wrote it." Cowdrey reached past her to high five a couple of flute players who had joined a conga line.

Elise shook her head. "That's a myth, I think. He wrote it later. Anyway, I have something I've been working on. Something of my own." Her eyes lowered.

"Why am I not surprised?"

It took the band a half hour to settle down. They cut the practice short after just two run throughs of the Beatles medley.

For the first time in two years, Cowdrey didn't walk the halls before going to bed. We are adults here, he thought. The paradigm has shifted. He sighed as he lay down, believing when he went to sleep his dreams would be undisturbed and packed with beautifully played music, but after an hour trying to convince himself he'd changed, he rose, dressed, and walked



the hall, listening at each door. Satisfied at last, he went back to his room, and his dreams played undisturbed with flawless performances.

In the morning, he found a note pushed under his door. "A wedding will not get us home. They want a perfect performance! Get us home!" Cowdrey snorted in disgust. Nobody could know what they wanted. They might not want anything. He folded the note in half and put it inside his band management book. Even the Perfectionists couldn't bother him today, and they wouldn't, at least until after the wedding. And who knows, he thought, sometimes the best way to a long term goal is to focus on a short term one.

Elise distributed the new march to the section leaders, who organized a music-transcribing session. For over an hour, the band met in the auditorium to make their copies. "You'd think if aliens could snatch us up to play concerts, they could at least provide a decent photocopier," grumbled the oboist, who had several dozen bars of sixteenths and two key changes to write for herself.

A clarinet player finished, then studied the music. "This is cool. If I knew half as much as Elise does, I'd count myself a genius."

Cowdrey waited for someone to laugh. It wasn't the kind of comment kids make about each other. Someone else said, "Really!"

The rest continued to write. Cowdrey said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Maybe what they want is a well-played *new* piece. Soon as we finish here, break into your sections and work on this."

For the next three days leading to the Friday concert and wedding, practice went better than Cowdrey could have imagined, and not just on the new piece either. They ascended to new heights during "March of the Irish Dragoons," and they suddenly mastered the eighth-note quintuplets and the bi-tonal passages in "Ascensions" they'd fumbled before. Elise popped up everywhere, tweaking the music, erasing notes and rewriting passages, so every time Cowdrey rehearsed a section she had changed his pages.

On concert day, Cowdrey went to the auditorium early. He'd already realigned the chairs and moved the sections about to get the best sound balance for the new arrangements. The director's platform could accommodate Taylor and Liz when they exchanged vows. He put his hands behind his back and circled the room. Even shoes clicking on the floor sounded beautiful in the auditorium's acoustics. He paused at the window, which cast no reflection. Behind it, the auditorium light penetrated a couple of feet into the swirling brown cloud. Cowdrey cupped his hands around his eyes and leaned against the window to peer out. At first he'd been afraid to get against the glass. What if something horrible stepped forward, resolving itself from the smoke? He couldn't imagine an event more startling, but over the years the band had played in this room, no one had ever seen anything. Now the sinuous smoke's motion soothed him, as if he looked into ocean waves. It was meditative.

Elise cleared her throat when she entered. She wore her marching uniform, the most formal outfit anyone in the band had. Soon, the other members filtered in, filled with anticipation, gaily bedecked in their uniforms. A grinning Taylor and bashful Liz came in last, music tucked under their arms.

As he had a thousand times before, the director brought the band to attention, hands raised, ready for the downbeat. He inhaled deeply. A good breath, he thought. Let's all start on a good breath. Soon, they were deep into the Beatles medley. Elise had changed the music so radically the original tune vanished at times, then resurfaced later in unexpected ways. The clarinets swelled with the "Yellow Submarine" bridge as the trombones's improvisational bars ended. Later, out of a melodious but unrecognizable tune, the xylophone led them into "Hey Jude."

They moved through song after song. Never had the band's sound been so tight. Every solo hit right. Even the tricky transitions flew until they reached "The King's Feast," the second to last piece. He wiped sweat from his forehead before leading them into the opening bars, and it wasn't until he neared the end that he realized the French horns had played their part exactly on beat. Thomas had hit his entrance on cue. Cowdrey almost laughed in relief as he brought them to the conclusion. Thomas was safe.

Cowdrey put the baton on the podium and nodded to Elise, who had already stored her flute on the stand next to her chair. She came forward solemnly, climbed the platform, then picked up the baton. Shuffling their papers, the band switched to her wedding march music. The baton's tip pointed up. She took her own deep breath. The march began, a lingering intro that sounded nothing like a march or wedding music, but soon the drums rose from behind. Cowdrey hadn't realized they were playing at all. He'd been paying attention to the odd harmonics in the flute and clarinet section. But there the drums were, dancing rhythms that made him shift his look to them. Then the brass opened, and the tune bounced from side to side, all in a few bars, all too quick before fading for the ceremony. Cowdrey closed his eyes. "What was that?" he thought. He almost asked her to play it again.

He stood to the side on the floor a foot below the director's platform, Taylor and Liz's wedding vows ready to read. On cue, the two held hands and came forward. Music swelled around them as they made their way toward the front. The musicians played with part attention on Elise and part on the young couple.

Cowdrey read a preamble, his heart in his throat, Elise's wedding march still in his ears. Taylor and Liz exchanged vows. They kissed. As they exited, arms around each other, two drummers threw confetti, and the band played the wedding march's coda, seeming to pick up without losing a beat. Nothing Cowdrey had ever heard sounded like this. Clarity of notes. Surprising shifts in scale. A moment where a single cornet carried the music before the band swallowed it whole, repeating the notes but changing them round so what was bright became dark, and the dark exploded like fireworks. The music filled Cowdrey's chest, pressed cold compresses of notes to his fevered head, made him sway in fear that it would end or the band would break, but they didn't. The music ascended and swooped and pressed outward and in. At the end, the sound flooded the room, as if to push the windows open to free the band from captivity and give them the grassy pastures Elise talked about so often, rushing toward the triumphant climax they'd been practicing for the last three days. Cowdrey heard wind caressing the tips of uncut grass. He smelled

the meadow awash with summer heat. The music painted Earth and home so fully Cowdrey nearly wept from it, but then it ended. Elise held them on the last note, her face lit with concentration and triumph. Her fist closed, cutting the band off, leaving the memory of her composition lingering in the air. Cowdrey could still hear it, ringing. The lights began to flicker. They loved it, he thought. He turned to salute Elise, the ringing emanating from the middle of his head.

Then he recognized the sound in the strobe-effect lighting. It built until he thought it would burst him open, and he fell.

A short soft shock of waking.

His cheek rested against cool metal. A weight pressed against his other side. Groggily, Cowdrey sat up. He was in a bus parked in the dark. The student leaning against him groaned, rubbed her eyes, then sat up too. Other bodies stirred in front and behind them. Outside the window, a street light showed a long chain link fence and a sign, POLICE EVIDENCE YARD.

"My god," said someone in a voice filled with disbelief. "We're home."

Someone started crying. Their voices mixed. Some whooped and yelled. Some laughed, all at once, voices and sounds mixing.

They poured from the bus into the parking lot, still in uniform, holding on to each other. A boy rattled the gate locked by a large chain and a hefty padlock. A head poked up in the lit window of the building beyond. A few seconds later two policeman carrying flashlights ran out the back door. Cowdrey started counting heads, but someone noticed before he did.

"Where's Elise?"

For a second, the happy noise continued.

"Where's Elise?"

Cowdrey stood on the step into the bus, looking over the crowd. One by one, they stopped talking. They didn't appear so old now, the street light casting dark shadows on their faces. He stepped down, walked through them, checking each expression. No crooked glasses. No clipboard tucked under the arm.

Cowdrey pictured her alone in the empty auditorium. Were the lights still flickering? She, the one who wanted to go home the most, stood now, among the silent folding chairs, staring back at the swirling smoke behind windows. What had they wanted from us? What had they wanted?

The band looked at each other, then down at their feet, unable to meet each other's gaze. They looked down, and Cowdrey couldn't breathe.

He moved through the darkness surrounding the band, turning the ones toward him who faced away, searching their faces, but he had already accepted it. He'd lost her. Elise was gone.

As the cops unlocked the gates, shouting their questions, Cowdrey could see the days coming: the interviews, the articles in magazines, the disbelief, the changes in his life. One day, though, after the story had passed, he'd stand in front of another junior high band. He'd raise arms high before the first note, encouraging the players to take that first good breath. But Cowdrey could already feel in his chest the tightness, the constriction, and he knew he'd never be able to make the music good again.

He wouldn't be able to breathe. ○

## RESERVATIONS SUGGESTED

In the future,  
cars will be powered  
by thought, distances  
measured by the duration of  
a song, and vacation hideaways,  
each priced accordingly, either  
real-time, virtual, or tucked  
away in one of eleven  
parallel universes.

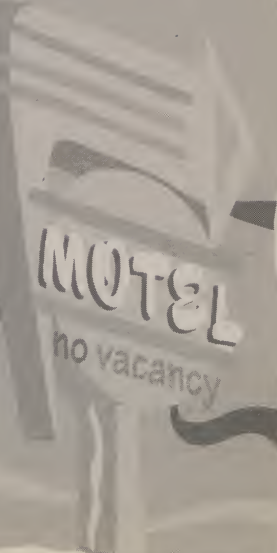
Accommodations  
will range from Motel 6 retro  
to Cloud City modern, the staff,  
whether robot, human, or hybrid,  
professional in every way.

Traditional time-shares  
will be the norm, calculated on  
multiple levels, a complicated piece  
of work at best, if not for your  
standard dashboard AI.

For those back home,  
virtual postcards will help take  
the longing out of those wish you  
were here postscripts, and entice  
the addressee to follow.

Reservations are  
suggested, as in all plans  
dealing with the future, but  
control of the weather and the  
times will still prove elusive,  
so, pack accordingly.

—G.O. Clark



MOTEL  
no vacancy

# THE PROPHET OF FLORES

Ted Kosmatka

Ted Kosmatka tells us he's a lab rat from the north coast of Indiana. Since his first sale to *Asimov's*—"The God Engine" (October/November 2005)—his stories have sold to both literary and science fiction markets. He has tales forthcoming from *Ideomancer* and *City Slab*, and the play that he co-wrote, *Steel and Roses*, has been performed in Illinois, Indiana, and New York City. You can check out his website at [www.tedkosmatka.com](http://www.tedkosmatka.com). Ted explores the multiverse in his third story for us and finds a dangerous road not taken by our own scientific revolution.

*If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?*

—Voltaire

When Paul was a boy, he played God in the attic above his parents' garage. That's what his father called it, playing God, the day he found out. That's what he called it the day he smashed it all down.

Paul built the cages out of discarded two-by-fours he'd found behind the garage, and quarter-inch mesh he bought from the local hardware store. While his father was away speaking at a scientific conference on divine cladistics, Paul began constructing his laboratory from plans he'd drawn during the last day of school.

Because he wasn't old enough to use his father's power tools, he had to use a handsaw to cut the wood for the cages. He used his mother's sturdy black scissors to snip the wire mesh. He borrowed hinges from old cabinet doors, and he borrowed nails from the rusty coffee can that hung over his father's unused workbench.

One evening his mother heard the hammering and came out to the garage. "What are you doing up there?" she asked, speaking in careful English, peering up at the rectangle of light that spilled down from the attic.

Paul stuck his head through the opening, all spiky black hair and saw-

dust. "I'm just playing around with some tools," he said. Which was, in some sense, the truth. Because he couldn't lie to his mother. Not directly.

"Which tools?"

"Just a hammer and some nails."

She stared up at him, her delicate face a broken Chinese doll—pieces of porcelain re-glued subtly out of alignment. "Be careful," she said, and he understood she was talking both about the tools and about his father.

"I will."

The days turned into weeks as Paul worked on the cages. Because the materials were big, he built the cages big—less cutting that way. In reality, the cages were enormous, over-engineered structures, ridiculously outsized for the animals they'd be holding. They weren't mouse cages so much as mouse cities—huge tabletop-sized enclosures that could have housed German Shepherds. He spent most of his paper route money on the project, buying odds and ends that he needed: sheets of plexi, plastic water bottles, and small dowels of wood he used for door latches. While the other children in the neighborhood played basketball or wittedandu, Paul worked.

He bought exercise wheels and built walkways; he hung loops of yarn the mice could climb to various platforms. The mice themselves he bought from a pet store near his paper route. Most were white feeder mice used for snakes, but a couple were of the more colorful, fancy variety. And there were even a few English mice—sleek, long-bodied show mice with big tulip ears and glossy coats. He wanted a diverse population, so he was careful to buy different kinds.

While he worked on their permanent homes, he kept the mice in little aquariums stacked on a table in the middle of the room. On the day he finished the last of the big cages, he released the mice into their new habitats one by one—the first explorers on a new continent. To mark the occasion, he brought his friend John over, whose eyes grew wide when he saw what Paul had made.

"You built all this?" John asked.

"Yeah."

"It must have taken you a long time."

"Months."

"My parents don't let me have pets."

"Neither do mine," Paul answered. "But anyway, these aren't pets."

"Then what are they?"

"An experiment."

"What kind of experiment?"

"I haven't figured that out yet."

Mr. Finley stood at the projector, marking a red ellipse on the clear plastic sheet. Projected on the wall, it looked like a crooked half-smile between the X and Y axis.

"This represents the number of daughter atoms. And *this* . . ." He drew the mirror image of the first ellipse. "This is the number of parent atoms." He placed the marker on the projector and considered the rows of students. "Can anyone tell me what the point of intersection represents?"

Darren Michaels in the front row raised his hand. "It's the element's half-life."

"Exactly. Johnson, in what year was radiometric dating invented?"

"1906."

"By whom?"

"Rutherford."

"What method did he use?"

"Uranium lead—"

"No. Wallace, can you tell us?"

"He measured helium as an intermediate decay product of uranium."

"Good, so then who used the uranium-lead method?"

"That was Boltwood, in 1907."

"And how were these initial results viewed?"

"With skepticism."

"By whom?"

"By the evolutionists."

"Good." Mr. Finley turned to Paul. "Carlson, can you tell us what year Darwin wrote *On the Origin of Species*?"

"1867, Paul said."

"Yes, and in what year did Darwin's theory finally lose the confidence of the larger scientific community?"

"That was 1932." Anticipating his next question, Paul continued. "When Kohlhorster invented potassium-argon dating. The new dating method proved the earth wasn't as old as the evolutionists thought."

"And in what year was the theory of evolution finally debunked completely?"

"1954, when Willard F. Libby invented carbon-14 dating at the University of Chicago. He won the Nobel prize in 1960 when he used carbon dating to prove, once and for all, that the Earth was 5,800 years old."

Paul wore a white lab coat when he entered the attic. It was one of his father's old coats, so he had to cut the sleeves to fit his arms. Paul's father was a doctor, the Ph.D kind. He was blond and big and successful. He'd met Paul's mother after grad school while consulting for a Chinese research firm. They had worked on the same projects for a while, but there was never any doubt that Paul's father was the bright light of the family. The genius, the famous man. He was also crazy.

Paul's father liked breaking things. He broke telephones, and he broke walls, and he broke tables. He broke promises not to hit again. One time, he broke bones; the police were called by the ER physicians who did not believe the story about Paul's mother falling down the stairs. They did not believe the weeping woman of porcelain who swore her husband had not touched her.

Paul's father was a force of nature, a cataclysm; as unpredictable as a comet strike or a volcanic eruption. The attic was a good place to hide, and Paul threw himself into his hobby.

Paul studied his mice as though they were Goodall's chimps. He documented their social interactions in a green spiral notebook. He found that, within the large habitats, they formed packs like wolves, with a



dominant male and a dominant female—a structured social hierarchy involving mating privileges, territory, and almost-ritualized displays of submission by males of lower rank. The dominant male bred most of the females, and mice, Timothy learned, could kill each other.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and the mouse populations expanded to fill the new worlds he'd created for them. The babies were born pink and blind, but as their fur came in, Paul began documenting colors in his notebook. There were fawns, blacks, and grays. Occasional agoutis. There were Irish spotted, and banded, and broken marked. In later generations, colors appeared that he hadn't purchased, and he knew enough about genetics to realize these were recessive genes cropping up.

Paul was fascinated by the concept of genes, the stable elements through which God provided for the transfer of heritable characteristics from one generation to the next. In school they called it divine transmission.

Paul did research and found that the pigmentation loci of mice were well-mapped and well-understood. He categorized his population by phenotype and found one mouse, a pale, dark-eyed cream that must have been a triple recessive: bb, dd, ee. But it wasn't enough to just have them, to observe them, to run the Punnett squares. He wanted to do real science. Because real scientists used microscopes and electronic scales, Paul asked for these things for Christmas.

Mice, he quickly discovered, did not readily yield themselves to microscopy. They tended to climb down from the stand. The electronic scale, however, proved useful. He weighed every mouse and kept meticulous records. He considered developing his own inbred strain—a line with some combination of distinctive characteristics—but he wasn't sure what characteristics to look for.

He was going over his notebook when he saw it. January-17. Not a date, but a mouse—the seventeenth mouse born in January. He went to the cage and opened the door. A flash of sandy fur, and he snatched it up by its tail—a brindle specimen with large ears. There was nothing really special about the mouse. It was made different from the other mice only by the mark in his notebook. Paul looked at the mark, looked at the number he'd written there. Of the more than ninety mice in his notebook, January-17 was, by two full grams, the largest mouse he'd ever weighed.

In school they taught him that through science you could decipher the truest meaning of God's words. God wrote the language of life in four letters—A, T, C, and G. That's not why Paul did it though, to get closer to God. He did it for the simplest reason, because he was curious.

It was early spring before his father asked him what he spent his time doing in the attic.

"Just messing around."

They were in his father's car on the way home from piano lessons. "Your mother said you built something up there."

Paul fought back a surge of panic. "I built a fort a while ago."

"You're almost twelve now. Aren't you getting a little old for forts?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"I don't want you spending all your time up there."

"All right."

"I don't want your grades slipping."

Paul, who hadn't gotten a B in two years, said, "All right."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, and Paul explored the walls of his newly shaped reality. Because he knew foreshocks when he felt them.

He watched his father's hands on the steering wheel. Though large for his age, like his father, Paul's features still favored his Asian mother and he sometimes wondered if that was part of it, this thing between his father and him, this gulf he could not cross. Would his father have treated a freckled, blond son any differently? No, he decided. His father would have been the same. The same force of nature; the same cataclysm. He couldn't help being what he was.

Paul watched his father's hand on the steering wheel, and years later, when he thought of his father, even after everything that happened, that's how he thought of him. That moment frozen. Driving in the car, big hands on the steering wheel, a quiet moment of foreboding that wasn't false, but was merely what it was, the best it would ever be between them.

"What have you done?" There was wonder in John's voice. Paul had snuck him up to the attic, and now Paul held Bertha up by her tail for John to see. She was a beautiful golden brindle, long whiskers twitching.

"She's the most recent generation, an F4."

"What does that mean?"

Paul smiled. "She's kin to herself."

"That's a big mouse."

"The biggest yet. Fifty-nine grams, weighed at a hundred days old. The average weight is around forty."

Paul put the mouse on John's hand.

"What have you been feeding her?" John asked.

"Same as the other mice. Look at this." Paul showed him the charts he'd graphed, like Mr. Finley, a gentle upward ellipse between the X and Y axis—the slow upward climb in body weight from one generation to the next.

"One of my F2s tipped the scales at forty-five grams, so I bred him to the biggest females, and they made more than fifty babies. I weighed them all at a hundred days and picked the biggest four. I bred them and did the same thing the next generation, choosing the heaviest hundred-day weights. I got the same bell-curve distribution—only the bell was shifted slightly to the right. Bertha was the biggest of them all."

John looked at Paul in horror. "That works?"

"Of course it works. It's the same thing people have been doing with domestic livestock for the last five thousand years."

"But this didn't take you thousands of years."

"No. Uh, it kind of surprised me it worked so well. This isn't even subtle. I mean, look at her, and she's only an F4. Imagine what an F10 might look like."

"That sounds like evolutionism."

"Don't be silly. It's just directional selection. With a diverse enough population, it's amazing what a little push can do. I mean, when you think about it, I hacked off the bottom 95 percent of the bell curve for five gen-

erations in a row. Of course the mice got bigger. I probably could have gone the other way if I'd wanted, made them smaller. There's one thing that surprised me, though, something I only noticed recently."

"What?"

"When I started, at least half of the mice were albino. Now it's down to about one in ten."

"Okay."

"I never consciously decided to select against that."

"So?"

"So, when I did culls . . . when I decided which ones to breed, sometimes the weights were about the same, and I'd just pick. I think I just happened to pick one kind more than the other."

"So what's your point?"

"So what if it happens that way in nature?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's like the dinosaurs. Or woolly mammoths, or cavemen. They were here once; we know that because we find their bones. But now they're gone. God made all life about six thousand years ago, right?"

"Yeah."

"But some of it isn't here anymore. Some died out along the way."

It happened on a weekend. Bertha was pregnant, obscenely, monstrously. Paul had isolated her in one of the aquariums, an island unto herself, sitting on a table in the middle of the room. A little tissue box sat in the corner of her small glass cage, and Bertha had shredded bits of paper into a comfortable nest in which to give birth to the next generation of goliath mice.

Paul heard his father's car pull into the garage. He was home early. Paul considered turning off the attic lights but knew it would only draw his father's suspicion. Instead he waited, hoping. The garage was strangely quiet—only the ticking of the car's engine. Paul's stomach dropped when he heard the creak of his father's weight on the ladder.

There was a moment of panic then—a single hunted moment when Paul's eyes darted for a place to hide the cages. It was ridiculous; there was no place to go.

"What's that smell?" his father asked as his head cleared the attic floor. He stopped and looked around. "Oh."

And that was all he said at first. That was all he said as he climbed the rest of the way. He stood there like a giant, taking it in. The single bare bulb draped his eyes in shadow. "What's this?" he said finally. His dead voice turned Paul's stomach to ice.

"What's this?" Louder now, and something changed in his shadow eyes. Paul's father stomped toward him, above him.

"What's this?" The words more shriek than question now, spit flying from his mouth.

"I, I thought—"

A big hand shot out and slammed into Paul's chest, balling his T-shirt into a fist, yanking him off his feet.

"What the fuck is this? Didn't I tell you no pets?" The bright light of the family, the famous man.

"They're not pets, they're—"

"God, it fucking stinks up here. You brought these things into the house? You brought this *vermin* into the house? Into my house!"

The arm flexed, sending Paul backward into the cages, toppling one of the tables—wood and mesh crashing to the floor, the squeak of mice and twisted hinges, months and months and months of work.

His father saw Bertha's aquarium and grabbed it. He lifted it high over his head—and there was a moment when Paul imagined he could almost see it, almost see Bertha inside, and the babies inside her, countless generations that would never be born. Then his father's arms came down like a force of nature, like a cataclysm. Paul closed his eyes against exploding glass, and all he could think was, *this is how it happens. This is exactly how it happens.*

Paul Carlson left for Stanford at seventeen. Two years later, his father was dead.

At Stanford he double-majored in genetics and anthropology, taking eighteen credit hours a semester. He studied transcripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Apocryphal verses; he took courses in Comparative Interpretation and Biblical Philosophy. He studied fruit flies and amphioxus. While still an undergraduate, he won a prestigious summer internship working under renowned geneticist Michael Poore.

Paul sat in classrooms while men in dark suits spun theories about Kibra and T-variants, about microcephalin-1 and haplogroup D. He learned researchers had identified structures within a family of proteins called AAA+ that were shown to initiate DNA replication, and he learned these genetic structures were conserved across all forms of life, from men to archae bacteria—the very calling card of the great designer.

Paul also studied the banned texts. He studied balancing equilibriums and Hardy-Weinburg; but alone at night, walking the dark halls of his own head, it was the trade-offs that fascinated him most. Paul was a young man who understood trade-offs.

He learned of the recently discovered Alzheimer's gene, APOE4—a gene common throughout much of the world; and he learned theories about how deleterious genes grew to such high frequencies. Paul learned that although APOE4 caused Alzheimer's, it also protected against the devastating cognitive consequences of early childhood malnutrition. The gene that destroys the mind at seventy, saves it at seven months. He learned that people with sickle cell trait are resistant to malaria; and heterozygotes for cystic fibrosis are less susceptible to cholera; and people with type A blood survived the plague at higher frequencies than other blood types, altering forever, in a single generation, the frequency of blood types in Europe. A process, some said, now being slow-motion mimicked by the gene CKR5 and HIV.

In his anthropology courses, Paul learned that all humans alive today could trace their ancestry back to Africa, to a time almost six thousand years ago when the whole of human diversity existed within a single small population. And there had been at least two dispersions out of Africa, his professors said, if not more—a genetic bottleneck in support of the Deluvian Flood Theory. But each culture had its own beliefs. Muslims called it Allah. Jews, Yahweh. The science journals were careful not to call

it God anymore; but they spoke of an intelligent designer—an architect, lowercase “a.” Though in his heart of hearts, Paul figured it all amounted to the same thing.

Paul learned they'd scanned the brains of nuns, looking for the God spot, and couldn't find it. He learned about evolutionism. Although long debunked by legitimate science, adherents of evolutionism still existed—their beliefs enjoying near immortality among the fallow fields of pseudoscience, cohabitating the fringe with older belief systems like astrology, phrenology, and acupuncture. Modern evolutionists believed the various dating systems were all incorrect; and they offered an assortment of unscientific explanations for how the isotope tests could all be wrong. In hushed tones, some even spoke of data tampering and conspiracies.

The evolutionists ignored the accepted interpretation of the geological record. They ignored the miracle of the placenta and the irreducible complexity of the eye.

During his junior and senior years, Paul studied archaeology. He studied the ancient remains of *Homo erectus*, and *Homo neanderthalensis*. He studied the un-Men; he studied *Afarensis*, and *Australopithecus*, and Pan.

In the world of archeology, the line between Man and un-Man could be fuzzy—but it was never unimportant. To some scientists, *Homo erectus* was a race of Man long dead, a withered branch on the tree of humanity. To those more conservative, he wasn't Man at all; he was other, a hiccup of the creator, an independent creation made from the same tool box. But that was an extreme viewpoint. Mainstream science, of course, accepted the use of stone tools as the litmus test. Men made stone tools. Soulless beasts didn't. Of course there were still arguments, even in the mainstream. The fossil KNM ER 1470, found in Kenya, appeared so perfectly balanced between Man and un-Man that a new category had to be invented: near-Man. The arguments could get quite heated, with both sides claiming anthropometric statistics to prove their case.

Like a benevolent teacher swooping in to stop a playground fight, the science of genetics arrived on the scene. Occupying the exact point of intersection between Paul's two passions in life—genetics and anthropology—the field of paleometagenomics was born.

Paul received a bachelor's degree in May and started a graduate program in September. Two years and an advanced degree later, he moved to the East Coast to work for Westing Genomics, one of the foremost genetics research labs in the world.

Three weeks after that, he was in the field in Tanzania, learning the proprietary techniques of extracting DNA from bones 5,800 years old. Bones from the very dawn of the world.

Two men stepped into the bright room.

“So this is where the actual testing is done?” It was a stranger's voice, the accent urban Australian.

Paul lifted his eyes from the microscope and saw his supervisor accompanied by an older man in a gray suit.

“Yes,” Mr. Lyons said.

The stranger shifted weight to his teak cane. His hair was short and gray, parted neatly on the side.

“It never ceases to amaze,” the stranger said, glancing around. “How

alike laboratories are across the world. Cultures who cannot agree on anything agree on this: how to design a centrifuge, where to put the test tube rack, what color to paint the walls—white, always. The bench tops, black.”

Mr. Lyons nodded. Mr. Lyons was a man who wore his authority like a uniform two sizes too large; it required constant adjustment to look presentable.

Paul stood, pulled off his latex gloves.

“Gavin McMaster,” the stranger said, sticking out a hand. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Carlson.”

They shook.

“Paul. You can call me Paul.”

“I apologize for interrupting your work,” Gavin said.

“It’s time I took a break anyway.”

“I’ll leave you two to your discussion,” Mr. Lyons said, and excused himself.

“Please,” Paul said, gesturing to a nearby work table. “Take a seat.”

Gavin sank onto the stool and set his briefcase on the table. “I promise I won’t take much of your time,” he said. “But I did need to talk to you. We’ve been leaving messages for the last few days and—”

“Oh.” Paul’s face changed. “You’re from—”

“Yes.”

“This is highly unusual for you to contact me here.”

“I can assure you these are very unusual circumstances.”

“Still, I’m not sure I like being solicited for one job while working at another.”

“I can see there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“How’s that?”

“You called it a job. Consider it a consulting offer.”

“Mr. McMaster, I’m very busy with my current work. I’m in the middle of several projects, and, to be honest, I’m surprised Westing let you through the door.”

“Westing is already onboard. I took the liberty of speaking to the management before contacting you today.”

“How did you . . .” Paul looked at him, and Gavin raised an eyebrow. With corporations, any question of “how” was usually rhetorical. The answer was always the same. And it always involved dollar signs.

“Of course, we’ll match that bonus to you, mate.” McMaster slid a check across the counter. Paul barely glanced at it.

“As I said, I’m in the middle of several projects now. One of the other samplers here would probably be interested.”

McMaster smiled. “Normally I’d assume that was a negotiating tactic. But that’s not the case here, is it?”

“No.”

“I was like you once. Hell, maybe I still am.”

“Then you understand.” Paul stood.

“I understand you better than you think. It makes it easier, sometimes, when you come from money. Sometimes I think that only people who come from it realize how worthless it really is.”

“That hasn’t been my experience. If you’ll excuse me.” Politeness like a wall, a thing he’d learned from his mother.

"Please," Gavin said. "Before you leave, I have something for you." He opened the snaps on his briefcase and pulled out a stack of glossy eight-by-ten photographs.

For a moment Paul just stood there. Then he took the photos from Gavin's extended hand. Paul looked at the pictures. Paul looked at them for a long time.

Gavin said, "These fossils were found last year on the island of Flores, in Indonesia."

"Flores," Paul whispered, still studying the photos. "I heard they found strange bones there. I didn't know anybody had published."

"That's because we haven't. Not yet, anyway."

"These dimensions can't be right. A six-inch ulna."

"They're right."

Paul looked at him. "Why me?" And just like that, the wall was gone. What lived behind it had hunger in its belly.

"Why not?"

It was Paul's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"Because you're good," Gavin said.

"So are others."

"Because you're young and don't have a reputation to risk."

"Or one to stand on."

Gavin sighed. "Because I don't know if archaeology was ever meant to be as important as it has become. Will that do for an answer? We live in a world where zealots become scientists. Tell me, boy, are you a zealot?"

"No."

"That's why. Or close enough."

*There were a finite number of unique creations at the beginning of the world—a finite number of species which has, since that time, decreased dramatically through extinction. Speciation is a special event outside the realm of natural processes, a phenomenon relegated to the moment of creation, and to the mysteries of Allah.*

—Expert witness, heresy trials, Ankara, Turkey.

**T**he flight to Bali was seventeen hours, and another two to Flores by chartered plane—then four hours by Jeep over the steep mountains and into the heart of the jungle. To Paul, it might have been another world. Rain fell, stopped, then fell again, turning the road into a thing which had to be reasoned with.

"Is it always like this?" Paul asked.

"No," Gavin said. "In the rainy season, the roads are much worse."

Flores, isle of flowers. From the air it had looked like a long ribbon of jungle thrust from blue water, part of a rosary of islands between Australia and Java. The Wallace Line—a line more real than any on a map—lay kilometers to the west, toward Asia and the empire of placental mammals. A stranger emperor ruled here.

Paul was exhausted by the time they pulled into Ruteng. He rubbed his



eyes. Children ran alongside the Jeep, their faces some combination of Malay and Papuan—brown skin, strong white teeth like a dentist's dream. The hill town crouched one foot in the jungle, one on the mountain. A valley flung itself from the edge of the settlement, a drop of kilometers.

The men checked into their hotel. Paul's room was basic, but clean, and Paul slept like the dead. The next morning he woke, showered and shaved. Gavin met him in the lobby.

"It's a bit rustic, I apologize," Gavin said.

"No, it's fine," Paul said. "There was a bed and a shower. That's all I needed."

"We use Ruteng as a kind of base camp for the dig. Our future accommodations won't be quite so luxurious."

Back at the Jeep, Paul checked his gear. It wasn't until he climbed into the passenger seat that he noticed the gun, its black leather holster duct-taped to the driver's door. It hadn't been there the day before.

Gavin caught him staring. "These are crazy times we live in, mate. This is a place history has forgotten till now. Recent events have made it remember."

"Which recent events are those?"

"Religious events to some folks' view. Political to others." Gavin waved his hand. "More than just scientific egos are at stake with this find."

They drove north, descending into the valley and sloughing off the last pretense of civilization. "You're afraid somebody will kidnap the bones?" Paul asked.

"Yeah, that's one of the things I'm afraid of."

"One?"

"It's easy to pretend that it's just theories we're playing with—ideas dreamed up in some ivory tower between warring factions of scientists. Like it's all some intellectual exercise." Gavin looked at him, his dark eyes grave. "But then you see the actual bones; you feel their weight in your hands, and sometimes theories die between your fingers."

The track down to the valley floor was all broken zig-zags and occasional, rounding turns. For long stretches, overhanging branches made a tunnel of the roadway—the jungle a damp cloth slapping at the windshield. But here and there that damp cloth was yanked aside, and out over the edge of the drop you could see a valley that Hollywood would love, an archetype to represent all valleys, jungle floor visible through jungle haze. In those stretches of muddy road, a sharp left pull on the steering wheel would have gotten them there quicker, deadier.

"Liang Bua," Gavin called their destination. "The Cold Cave." And Gavin explained that was how they thought it happened—the scenario. This steamy jungle all around, so two or three of them went inside to get cool, to sleep. Or maybe it was raining, and they went in the cave to get dry—only the rain didn't stop, and the river flooded, as it sometimes still did, and they were trapped inside the cave by the rising waters, their drowned bodies buried in mud and sediment.

The men rode in silence for a while before Gavin said it, a third option Paul felt coming. "Or they were eaten there."

"Eaten by what?"

"*Homo homini lupus est.*" Gavin said. "Man is wolf to man."

They crossed a swollen river, water rising to the bottom of the doors.

For a moment Paul felt the current grab the Jeep, pull, and it was a close thing, Gavin cursing and white-knuckled on the wheel, trying to keep them to the shallows. When they were past it he said, "You've got to keep it to the north; if you slide a few feet off straight, the whole bugger'll go tumbling downriver."

Paul didn't ask him how he knew.

Beyond the river was the camp. Researchers in wide-brimmed hats or bandanas. Young and old. Two or three shirtless. A dark-haired woman in a white shirt sat on a log outside her tent. The one feature unifying them all, good boots.

Every head followed the Jeep, and when the Jeep pulled to a stop, a small crowd gathered to help unpack. Gavin introduced him around. Eight researchers, plus two laborers still in the cave. Australian mostly. Indonesian. One American.

"Herpetology, mate," one of them said when he shook Paul's hand. Small, stocky, red-bearded; he couldn't have been more than twenty-two. Paul forgot his name the moment he heard it, but the introduction, "Herpetology, mate," stuck with him. "That's my specialty," the small man continued. "I got mixed up in this because of Professor McMaster here. University of New England, Australia." His smile was two feet wide under a sharp nose that pointed at his own chin. Paul liked him instantly.

When they'd finished unpacking the Jeep, Gavin turned to Paul. "Now I think it's time we made the most important introductions," he said.

It was a short walk to the cave. Jag-toothed limestone jutted from the jungle, an overhang of vine, and beneath that, a dark mouth. The stone was the brown-white of old ivory. Cool air enveloped him, and entering Liange Bua was a distinct process of stepping down. Once inside, it took Paul's eyes a moment to adjust. The chamber was thirty meters wide, open to the jungle in a wide crescent—mud floor, low-domed ceiling. There was not much to see at first. In the far corner, two sticks angled from the mud, and when he looked closer, Paul saw the hole.

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

Paul took off his backpack and stripped the white paper suit out of its plastic wrapper. "Who else has touched it?"

"Talford, Margaret, me."

"I'll need blood samples from everybody for comparison assays."

"DNA contamination?"

"Yeah."

"We stopped the dig when we realized the significance."

"Still. I'll need blood samples from anybody who has dug here, anybody who came anywhere near the bones. I'll take the samples myself tomorrow."

"I understand. Is there anything else you need?"

"Solitude." Paul smiled. "I don't want anybody in the cave for this part."

Gavin nodded and left. Paul broke out his tarps and hooks. It was best if the sampler was the person who dug the fossils out of the ground—or better yet, if the DNA samples were taken when the bones were still in the ground. Less contamination that way. And there was always contamination. No matter what precautions were taken, no matter how many tarps, or how few people worked at the site, there was still always contamination.

Paul slid down into the hole, flashlight strapped to his forehead, white

paper suit slick on the moist earth. From his perspective, he couldn't tell what the bones were—only that they were bones, half buried in earth. From his perspective, that's all that mattered. The material was soft, unfossilized; he'd have to be careful.

It took nearly seven hours. He snapped two dozen photographs, careful to keep track of which samples came from which specimens. Whoever these things were, they were small. He sealed the DNA samples into small, sterile lozenges for transport.

It was night when he climbed from under the tarp.

Outside the cave, Gavin was the first to find him in the firelight. "Are you finished?"

"For tonight. I have six different samples from at least two different individuals. Shouldn't take more than a few days."

McMaster handed him a bottle of whiskey.

"Isn't it a little early to celebrate?"

"Celebrate? You've been working in a grave all night. In America, don't they drink after funerals?"

That night over the campfire, Paul listened to the jungle sounds and to the voices of scientists, feeling history congeal around him.

"Suppose it isn't." Jack was saying. Jack was thin and American and very drunk. "Suppose it isn't in the same lineage with us, then what would that mean?"

The red-bearded herpetologist groaned. His name was James. "Not more of that doctrine of descent bullshit," he said.

"Then what is it?" someone added.

They passed the drink around, eyes occasionally drifting to Paul as if he were a priest come to grant absolution—his sample kit just an artifact of his priesthood. Paul swigged the bottle when it came his way. They'd finished off the whiskey long ago; this was some local brew brought by laborers, distilled from rice. Paul swallowed fire.

Yellow-haired man saying, "It's the truth," but Paul had missed part of the conversation, and for the first time he realized how drunk they all were; and James laughed at something, and the woman with the white shirt turned and said, "Some people have nicknamed it the 'hobbit.'"

"What?"

"Flores Man—the hobbit. Little people three feet tall."

"Tolkien would be proud," a voice contributed.

"A mandible, a fairly complete cranium, parts of a right leg and left innominate."

"But what is it?"

"Hey, are you staying on?"

The question was out there for two beats before Paul realized it was aimed at him. The woman's eyes were brown and searching across the fire. "Yeah," he said. "A few more days."

Then the voice again, "But what is it?"

Paul took another swallow—trying to cool the voice of panic in his head.

Paul learned about her during the next couple of days, the girl with the

white shirt. Her name was Margaret. She was twenty-eight. Australian. Some fraction aborigine on her mother's side, but you could only see it for sure in her mouth. The rest of her could have been Dutch, English, whatever. But that full mouth: teeth like Ruteng children, teeth like dentists might dream. She tied her brown hair back from her face, so it didn't hang in her eyes while she worked in the hole. This was her sixth dig, she told him. "This is the one." She sat on the stool while Paul took her blood, a delicate index finger extended, red pearl rising to spill her secrets. "Most archaeologists go a whole lifetime without a big find," she said. "Maybe you get one. Probably none. But this is the one I get to be a part of."

"What about the Leakeys?" Paul asked, dabbing her finger with cotton.

"Bah." She waved at him in mock disgust. "They get extra. Bloody Kennedys of archaeology."

Despite himself, Paul laughed.

*This brings us to the so-called doctrine of common descent, whereby each species is seen as a unique and individual creation. Therefore all men, living and dead, are descended from a common one-time creational event. To be outside of this lineage, no matter how similar in appearance, is to be other than Man.*

—Journal of Heredity

**T**hat evening, Paul helped Gavin pack the Jeep for a trek back up to Ruteng. "I'm driving our laborers back to town," Gavin told him. "They work one week on, one off. You want me to take your samples with me?"

Paul shook his head. "Can't. There are stringent protocols for chain of possession."

"Where are they now?"

Paul patted the cargo pocket of his pant leg.

"So when you get those samples back, what happens next?"

"I'll hand them over to an evaluation team."

"You don't test them yourself?"

"I'll assist, but there are strict rules. I test animal DNA all the time, and the equipment is all the same. But genus *Homo* requires a license and oversight."

"All right, mate, then I'll be back tomorrow evening to pick you up." Gavin went to the Jeep and handed Paul the sat phone. "In case anything happens while I'm gone."

"Do you think something will?"

"No," Gavin said. Then, "I don't know."

Paul fingered the sat phone, a dark block of plastic the size of a shoe. "What are you worried about?"

"To be honest, bringing you here has brought attention we weren't ready for. I received a troubling call today. So far, we've shuffled under the radar, but now . . . now we've flown in an outside tech, and people want to know why."

"What people?"

"Official people. Indonesia is suddenly very interested."

"Are you worried they'll shut down the dig?"

Gavin smiled. "Have you studied theology?"

"Why?"

"I've long been fascinated by the figure of Abraham. Are you familiar with Abraham?"

"Of course," Paul said, unsure where this was going.

"From this one shepherd stems the entire natural history of monotheism. He's at the very foundation of all three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. When Jews, Christians, and Muslims get on their knees for their One True God, it is to Abraham's God they pray." Gavin closed his eyes. "And still there is such fighting over steeples."

"What does this have to do with the dig?"

"The word 'prophet' comes from the Greek, *prophetes*. In Hebrew, the word is *nabi*. I think Abraham Heschel said it best when he wrote 'the prophet is the man who feels fiercely.' What do you think, Paul? Do you think prophets feel fiercely?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Oh, never mind." Gavin smiled again and shook his head. "It's just the rambling of an old man."

"You never answered whether you thought they'd shut down the dig."

"We come onto their land, their territory; we come into this place and we find bones that contradict their beliefs; what do you think might happen? Anything."

"Contradict their beliefs?" Paul said. "What do you believe about these bones? You've never said."

"I don't know. They could be pathological."

"That's what they said about the first Neanderthal bones. Except they kept finding them."

"It could be microcephaly."

"What kind of microcephaly makes you three feet tall?"

"The odd skull shape and small body-size could be unrelated. Pygmies aren't unknown to these islands."

"There are no pygmies this small."

"But perhaps the two things together . . . perhaps the bones are a microcephalic representation of . . ." his voice trailed off. Gavin sighed. He looked suddenly defeated.

"That's not what you believe, is it?" Paul said.

"These are the smallest bones discovered that look anything like us. Could they just be pathological humans? I don't know. Maybe. Pathology could happen anywhere, so we can't rule it out when we've only got a few specimens to work with. But what my mind keeps coming back to is that these bones weren't found just anywhere."

"What do you mean?"

"These bones weren't found in Africa, or Asia. These tiny bones were found on a tiny island. Near the bones of dwarf elephants. And that's a coincidence? They hunted dwarf elephants, for God's sake."

"So if not pathological, what do you believe they were? You still haven't said."

"That's the powerful thing about genetics, my friend. One does not have to believe. One can know. And that's precisely what is so dangerous."

\* \* \*

"Strange things happen on islands." Margaret's white shirt was gone. She sat slick-armed in overalls. Skin like a fine coat of gloss. The firelight beat the night back, lighting candles in their eyes. It was nearly midnight, and the researchers sat in a circle, listening to the crackle of the fire. Listening to the jungle.

"Like the Galápagos," she said. "The finches."

"Oh come on," James said. "The skulls we found are small, with brains the size of chimps. Island dwarfing of genus *Homo*; is that what you're proposing? Some sort of local adaptation over the last five thousand years?"

"It's the best we have."

"Those bones are too different. They're not of our line."

"But they're younger than the other archaics. It's not like *erectus*, some branch cut down at the dawn of time. These things survived here for a long time. The bones aren't even fossilized."

"It doesn't matter, they're still not us. Either they share common descent from Man, or they were a separate creation at the beginning. There is no in-between. And they're only a meter tall, don't forget."

"That's just an estimate."

"A good estimate."

"Achondroplasia—"

"Those skulls are as achondroplastic as I am. I'd say the sloped frontal bone is *anti*-achondroplastic."

"Some kind of growth hormone deficiency would—"

"No," Paul said, speaking for the first time. Every face turned toward him.

"No, what?"

"Pygmies have normal growth hormone levels," Paul said. "Every population studied—the negritos, the Andaman, the Congolese. All normal."

The faces stared. "It's the circulating domain of their receptors that are different," Paul continued. "Pygmies are pygmies because of their GH receptors, not the growth hormone itself. If you inject a pygmy child with growth hormone, you still get a pygmy."

"Well still," Margaret said. "I don't see how that impacts whether these bones share common descent or not."

James turned to the circle of faces. "So are they on our line? Are they us, or other?"

"Other."

"Other."

"Other."

Softly, the girl whispered in disbelief, "But they had stone tools."

The faces turned to Paul, but he only watched the fire and said nothing.

The next morning started with a downpour. The dig team huddled in tents, or under the tarped lean-to near the fire pit. Only James braved the rain, stomping off into the jungle. He was back in an hour, smiling ear to ear.

"Well, will you look at that," James said, holding something out for Paul to see.

"What is it?"

"Partially eaten monitor. A species only found here."

Paul saw now that it was a taloned foot that James held. "That's a big lizard."

"Oh, no. This was just a juvenile. Mother nature is odd this side of the Wallace line. Not only are most of the species on this side not found anywhere else. A lot of them aren't even vaguely related to anything else. It's like God started from scratch to fill all the niches."

"How'd you get interested in herpetology?" Paul asked.

"By His creations shall ye know God."

"McMaster mentioned a dwarf elephant."

"Yeah, stegadon. They're extinct now, though."

"What killed them off?"

"Same thing that killed off a lot of the ancient fauna on the island. Classic catastrophism, a volcanic eruption. We found the ash layer just above the youngest bones."

Once, lying in bed with a woman, Paul had watched the moon through the window. The woman traced his scars with her finger.

"Your father was brutal."

"No," Paul had said. "He was broken, that's all."

"There's a difference?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"He was always sorry afterward."

"That mattered?"

"Every single time."

*A: Incidences of local adaptation have occurred, sure. Populations adapt to changing conditions all the time.*

*Q: Through what process?*

*A: Differential reproductive success. Given genetic variability, it almost has to happen. It's just math and genes. Fifty-eight hundred years is a long time.*

*Q: Can you give an example?*

*A: Most dogs would fall into this category, having been bred by man to suit his needs. While physically different from each other, when you study their genes, they're all one species—though admittedly divided into several distinct clades.*

*Q: So you're saying God created the original dog, but Man bred the different varieties?*

*A: You called it God, not me. And for the record, honey, God created the gray wolf. Man created dogs.*

—excerpted from the trial of geneticist Michael Poore

It came the next morning in the guise of police action. It came in shiny new Daihatsus with roll-bars and off-road tires. It came with guns. Mostly, it came with guns.

Paul heard them before he saw them, men shouting in a language he



could not understand. He was with James at the cave's entrance. When Paul saw the first assault rifle, he sprinted for the tents. He slid the DNA lozenges into a pouch in his belt and punched numbers on the sat phone. Gavin picked up on the second ring. "The police are here," Paul said.

"Good Lord, I just spoke to officials today," Gavin said. There was shouting outside the tents—angry shouts. "They assured me nothing like this would happen."

"They lied."

Behind him, James said, "This is bad. This is very bad."

"Where are you?" Paul asked.

"I'm still in Ruteng," Gavin said.

"Then this will be over by the time you can get here."

"Paul, it's not safe for you th—"

Paul hung up. *Tell me something I don't know.*

He took his knife from his sample kit and slit the back of the tent open. He slid through, James following close behind. Paul saw Margaret standing uncertain at the edge of the jungle. Their eyes met and Paul motioned toward the Jeeps; on the count of three, they all ran for it.

They climbed in and shut the doors. The soldiers—for that's what Paul knew they were now—the soldiers didn't notice them until Paul started the engine. Malay faces swung around, mouths open in shouts of outrage.

"You'll probably want your seatbelts on for this," Paul said. Then he gunned it, spitting dirt.

"Don't shoot," James whispered in the backseat, eyes closed in prayer.

"What?" Paul said.

"If they shoot, they're not police."

A round smashed through the rear window and blew out a chunk of the front windshield, spidering the safety glass.

"Shit!" Margaret screamed.

A quick glance in the rear-view, and Paul saw soldiers climbing into one of the Daihatsus. Paul yanked the wheel right.

"Not that way!" Margaret shouted. Paul ignored her and floored the accelerator.

Jungle whipped past, close enough to touch. Ruts threatened to buck them from the cratered roadway. A Daihatsu whipped into view behind them. Shots rang out, a sound like Chinese firecrackers, the ding of metal. They rounded the bend, and the river came into view—big and dumb as the sky. Paul gunned the engine.

"We're not going to make it across!" James shouted.

"We only need to get halfway."

Another shot slammed into the back of the Jeep.

They hit the river like a slow-speed crash, water roaring up and over the broken windshield—the smell of muck suddenly overpowering.

Paul stomped his foot to the floor.

The Jeep chugged, drifted, caught gravel. They got about halfway across before Paul yanked the steering wheel to the left. The world came unstuck and started to shift. The right front fender came up, rocking with the current. The engine died. They were floating.

Paul looked back. The pursuing vehicle skidded to a halt at the shoreline, and men jumped out. The Jeep heaved, one wheel pivoting around a submerged rock.

"Can you swim?" Paul asked.

"Now you ask us?"

"I'd unbuckle if I were you."

The Jeep hit another rock, metal grinding on stone, then sky traded places with water, and everything went dark.

They dragged themselves out of the water several miles downriver, where a bridge crossed the water. They followed the dirt road to a place called Rea. From there they took a bus. Margaret had money.

They didn't speak about it until they arrived at Bajawa.

"Do you think they're okay?" Margaret asked.

"I think it wouldn't serve their purpose to hurt the dig team. They only wanted the bones."

"They shot at us."

"Because they assumed we had something they wanted. They were shooting at the tires."

"No," she said. "They weren't."

Three rented nights in the hotel room, and James couldn't leave—that hair like a great big handle anybody could pick up and carry, anybody with eyes and a voice. Some of the locals hadn't seen red hair in their lives, and James's description was prepackaged for easy transport. Paul, however, blended—just another vaguely Asian set of cheekbones in the crowd, even if he was a half a foot taller than the locals.

That night, staring at the ceiling from one of the double beds, James said, "If those bones aren't us . . . then I wonder what they were like."

"They had fire and stone tools," Paul said. "They were probably a lot like us."

"We act like we're the chosen ones, you know? But what if it wasn't like that?"

"Don't think about it," Margaret said.

"What if God had all these different varieties . . . all these different walks, these different options at the beginning, and we're just the ones who killed the others off?"

"Shut up," she said.

"What if there wasn't just one Adam, but a hundred Adams?"

"Shut the fuck up, James."

There was a long quiet, the sound of the street filtering through the thin walls. "Paul," James said. "If you get your samples back to your lab, you'll be able to tell, won't you?"

Paul was silent. He thought of the evaluation team and wondered.

"The winners write the history books," James said. "Maybe the winners write the bibles, too. I wonder what religion died with them."

The next day, Paul left to buy food. When he returned Margaret was gone.

"Where is she?"

"She left to find a phone. She said she'd be right back."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"I couldn't."

Day turned into evening. By darkness, they both knew she wasn't coming back.

"How are we going to get home?" James asked.

"I don't know."

"And your samples. Even if we got to an airport, they'd never let you get on the plane with them. You'll be searched. They'll find them."

"We'll find a way once things have settled down."

"Things are never going to settle down."

"They will."

"No, you still don't get it. When your entire culture is predicated on an idea, you can't afford to be proven wrong."

Out of deep sleep, Paul heard it. Something.

He'd known this was coming, though he hadn't been aware that he'd known, until that moment. The creak of wood, the gentle breeze of an open door. Shock and awe would have been better—an inrush of soldiers, an arrest of some kind, expulsion, deportation, the legal system. A silent man in the dark meant many things. None of them good. The word assassin rose up in his mind.

Paul breathed. There was a cold in him—a part of him that was dead, a part of him that could never be afraid. A part of him his father had put there. Paul's eyes searched the shadows and found it, the place where a shadow moved, a breeze that eased across the room. If there was only one, he had a chance.

Paul thought of making a run for it, sprinting for the door, leaving the samples and this place behind; but James, still sleeping, stopped him. He made up his mind.

Paul exploded from the bed, flinging the blanket ahead of him, wrapping that part of the darkness; and a shape moved, darkness like a puma's spots, black on black—there even though you can't see it. And Paul knew he'd surprised him, that darkness, and he knew, instantly, that it wouldn't be enough. A blow rocked Paul off his feet, forward momentum carrying him into the wall. The mirror shattered, glass crashing to the floor.

"What the fuck?" James hit the light, and suddenly the world snapped into existence, a flashbulb stillness—and the assassin was Indonesian, preternatural silence coming off him like a heat shimmer. He carried endings with him, nothingness in a long blade. The insult of it hit home. The shocking fucking insult, standing there, knees bent, bright blade in one hand—blood on reflective steel. That's when Paul felt the pain. It was only then he realized he'd already been opened.

And the Indonesian moved fast. He moved so fast. He moved faster than Paul's eyes could follow, covering distance like thought, across the room to James, who had time only to flinch before the knife parted him. Such a professional, and James' eyes went wide in surprise. Paul moved using the only things he had, size, strength, momentum. He hit the assassin like a linebacker, sweeping him into his arms, crushing him

against the wall. Paul felt something snap, a twig, a branch, something in the Indonesian's chest—and they rolled apart, the assassin doing something with his hands; the rasp of blade on bone, a new blackness, and Paul flinched from the blow, feeling the steel leave his eye socket.

There was no anger. It was the strangest thing. To be in a fight for his life and not be angry. The assassin came at him again, and it was only Paul's size that saved him. He grabbed the arm and twisted, bringing the fight to the floor. A pushing down of his will into three square inches of the Indonesian's throat—a caving-in like a crumpling aluminum can, but Paul still held on, still pushed until the lights went out of those black eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

Paul rolled off him and collapsed to the floor. He crawled over to James. It wasn't a pool of blood. It was a swamp, the mattress soggy with it. James lay on the bed, still conscious.

"Don't bleed on me, man," James said. "No telling what you Americans might carry. Don't want to have to explain it to my girlfriend."

Paul smiled at the dying man, crying and bleeding on him, wiping the blood from his beard with a pillowcase. He held James's hand until he stopped breathing.

Paul's eye opened to white. He blinked. A man in a suit sat in the chair next to the hospital bed. A man in a police uniform stood near the door. "Where am I?" Paul asked. He didn't recognize his own voice. It was an older man. Who'd eaten glass.

"Maumere," the suited man said. He was white, mid-thirties, lawyer written all over him.

"How long?"

"A day."

Paul touched the bandage over his face. "Is my eye . . ."

"I'm sorry."

Paul took the news with a nod. "How did I get here?"

"They found you naked in the street. Two dead men in your room."

"So what happens now?"

"Well that depends on you." The man in the suit smiled. "I'm here at the behest of certain parties interested in bringing this to a quiet close."

"Quiet?"

"Yes."

"Where is Margaret? Mr. McMaster?"

"They were put on flights back to Australia this morning."

"I don't believe you."

"Whether you believe or not is of no consequence to me. I'm just answering your questions."

"What about the bones?"

"Confiscated for safekeeping, of course. The Indonesians have closed down the dig. It is their cave, after all."

"What about my DNA samples in the hotel room, the lozenges?"

"They've been confiscated and destroyed."

Paul sat quietly.

"How did you end up in the street?" the suit asked.

"I walked."

"How did you end up naked?"

"I figured it was the only way they'd let me live. The only way to prove I didn't have the samples. I was bleeding out. I knew they'd still be coming."

"You are a smart man, Mr. Carlson. So you figured you'd let them have the samples?"

"Yeah," Paul said.

The suited man stood and left the room.

"Mostly," Paul said.

On the way to the airport, Paul told the driver to pull over. He paid the fare and climbed out. He took a bus to Bengali, and from there took a cab to Rea.

He climbed on a bus in Rea, and as it bore down the road, Paul yelled, "Stop!"

The driver hit the brakes. "I'm sorry," Paul said. "I've forgotten something." He climbed off the bus and walked back to town. No car followed.

Once in town, down one of the small side streets, he found it, the flower pot with the odd pink plant. He scooped dirt out of the base.

The old woman shouted something at him. He held out money, "For the plant," he said. "I'm a flower lover." She might not have understood English, but she understood money.

He walked with the plant under his arm. James had been right about some things. Wrong about others. Not a hundred Adams, no. Just two. All of Australoid creation like some parallel world. *And you shall know God by His creations.* But why would God create two Adams? That's what Paul had wondered. The answer was that He wouldn't.

Two Adams. Two gods. One on each side of the Wallace Line.

Paul imagined it began as a competition. A line drawn in the sand, to see whose creations would dominate.

Paul understood the burden Abraham carried, to witness the birth of a religion.

As Paul walked through the streets he dug his fingers through the dirt. His fingers touched it, and he pulled the lozenge free. The lozenge no evaluation team would ever lay eyes on. He would make sure of that.

He passed a woman in a doorway, an old woman with a beautiful, full mouth. He thought of the bones in the cave, and of the strange people who had once crouched on this island.

He handed her the flower. "For you," he said.

He hailed a cab and climbed inside. "Take me to the airport."

As the old cab bounced along the dusty roads, Paul took off his eye-patch. He saw the cabbie glance into his rear-view and then look away, repulsed.

"They lied, you see," Paul told the cabbie. "About the irreducible complexity of the eye. Oh, there are ways."

The cabbie turned his radio up, keeping his face forward. Paul grimaced as he unpacked his eye, pulling white gauze out in long strips—pain exploding in his skull.

"A prophet is one who feels fiercely," he said, then slid the lozenge into his empty eye socket. ○

Kit Reed's most recent novel, *The Baby Merchant*, is now available in trade paperback from Tor. *Thinner Than Thou* (Tor, 2005) won the A.L.A. Alex award, and two of her books—*Little Sisters of the Apocalypse* and *Weird Women, Wired Women*—were finalists for the Tiptree prize. Her next project is a young-adult novel, *The Night Children*, that is forthcoming from Tor. In her latest story for us, Kit takes a look at what happens when a young man, whose wolf family may have been less feral than his original human kin, finally decides to make use of . . .

# WHAT WOLVES KNOW

Kit Reed

**W**hen you have been raised by wolves people expect better of you, but you have no idea what they mean by *better*.

Happy comes out of the crate panting and terrified.

When you have been raised by wolves, you expect better of people.

Injured in the struggle before the dart bit him and his world went away, Happy blinks into the white glare.

A dark shape moves into the blinding light. Sound explodes, a not-quite bark. "Welcome home!"

*This is nothing like home.* Then why is the smell of this place so familiar? Troubled, Happy backs away, sucking his torn paw.

He hears a not-quite purr. "Is that him?"

"Back off, Susan, you're scaring him. Handsome bastard, under all the filth." The dark shape gets bigger. "Hold still so we can look at you."

Happy scrambles backward.

"Wait, dammit. What's the matter with your hand?"

The not-quite bark-er is not quite a wolf. Pink, he is, and naked, except for fur on top, with all his pink parts wrapped like a package in tan cloth. A . . . Hunter is the first thought that comes. Happy has never been this close to one, not that he chooses to remember. He looks down. His body is choking. There is cloth on Happy too! It won't come off no matter how hard he shakes. He tears at it with his teeth.

The not-wolf yaps, "Stop that! We want you looking good for the press conference."

Happy does not know what this means. With his back hairs rising, he gives the wolf's first warning. He *grrrs* at the man. Man. That's one of Happy's words. And the other? Woman. The rest, he will not parse. The man grabs for him even though Happy rolls back his lips to show his fangs. The wolf's second warning. Now, wolves, wolves know when close is too close, and they keep their distance. With wolves, you always know where you are.

Wolves don't stare like that unless they are about to spring and rip your throat out, but unlike the wolf, man has no code. If Happy bolts, will this one bring him down and close those big square teeth in him?

"Hold still! What happened to your hand?"

Happy does as taught; he snarls. The wolf's last warning.

"Now, stop. I didn't bring you all this way to hurt you."

"Brent, he's hurt." The other voice is not at all like barking. "Oh, you poor thing, you're bleeding."

The man growls, "Come here. We can't let the people see blood."

Happy bunches his shoulders and drops to a crouch, but the man keeps on coming. Happy backs and backs. Oh, that thing he does with his face, too many teeth showing. Just stop! The more Happy scrambles away the more the man crowds him. At his back the walls meet like the jaws of a trap. He tips back his head and howls. "*Ah-whooooooooo . . .*"

"Quiet! What will people think?"

"*Ah-whooooooooo.*" Happy stops breathing. He is listening. Not one wolf responds. There is an unending din in this bright place but there are no wolves anywhere. Even though he was running away when the humans caught him, Happy's heart shudders. He is separated from his pack.

"Shut up. Shut up and I'll get you a present."

There are words Happy knows and words he doesn't know, but he remembers only one of them well enough to speak. "Oh," he barks bravely, even though he is cornered. "Oh, oh!"

"That's better. Now, hold still." When a human shows its teeth at you it means something completely different from what you are taught to watch out for, but you had better watch out for it.

The woman purrs, "Brent, you're scaring him!"

Woman. Another of Happy's words. The sound she makes is nothing like a howl, but he thinks they are kindred.

"Are you going to help me or what?" The man lunges. Should Happy attack? Other words rush in. Clothes. Arms. Clothes cover the man's stiff arms and he is waving them madly. How can Happy tear out the throat with all that in the way? Can he bring the man down before he pulls out his . . .



Another of Happy's words comes back. Gun. It makes him shudder.

"Brent, he's shaking."

"I'm only trying to help him!"

"Oh, you poor thing." Sweet, that voice. She sounds like his . . . Another word he used to know. *Mother*. Parts of Happy change in ways he does not understand. She says, "Look at him, Brent, he's shaking!"

"Oh," Happy barks hysterically. "Oh, oh!"

"Come on, now. Calm down or I'll give you another shot."

The man makes a grab for him. In another minute those hands will close in his fur. Grief touches Happy like a feather, for like the man with his grasping fingers and not-quite barking, Happy is more pink than fur. It is confusing.

"Don't be afraid," the woman says. "Come on, sweetie, come to Mother."

Happy will not know exactly who he means when he thinks, *This is nothing like Mother*. It does not explain, but measures the extent of his confusion. In this and every other circumstance, Happy's position is ambiguous.

This is not one of Happy's words: ambiguous. He has been pulled out of a place he can't explain into a world he doesn't understand and it makes him sick with grief.

He doesn't belong anywhere.

"Oh," Happy yelps. Then more words come. "Oh, don't!" Although he has outlived his mother Sonia and half his litter-mates, in wolf years, in human time, Happy is still a puppy.

He does what any puppy does when cornered and outnumbered. He rolls over and shows his throat.

"For God's sake, kid, get up. What will people think? Get him up, Susan, they're staring."

Others come. Men. Women. People with—how does he know this—cameras! People are pointing their cameras. Kept out by the rope that protects the live baggage claim area, strangers jostle, straining to see.

There are words Happy knows and words he does not choose to understand. She growls, "You should have thought about that before you snatched him."

"Not snatched," the man says firmly. He says in a loud voice because they are not alone here, "*Rescued*. This is not what you think," he shouts to the onlookers. "This is my long-lost brother, I went through hell to save him."

"Stuff it, Brent. They don't care who he is or what you did."

"I rescued him from a wolf pack in the wild!"

She says, "They aren't interested, they're embarrassed."

He shouts, "They stole him from our family!" He is trying to get Happy on his feet but Happy flops every which way, like any puppy. Brent tells the crowd, "When they found him, the police called me."

Happy gnashes at his hand.

"Ow!" Brent shouts over Happy's head, "Olmstead. My name is on the dogtag!"

*Dogtag*. It is confusing. Is he less wolf than dog?

"Hush, Brent," the woman says. "Let me do this."

Flat on his back with his paws raised, Happy lifts his head.

Unlike the pink man, the woman is gentle and she smells good. Hair. Not fur. Nice hair. Clothes like flowers.

"Sweetie, are you all right?"

Oh, that soft purr. Happy wriggles, hoping to be stroked, but there will be no stroking. What was that word he used to have?

*Ma'am.* It doesn't come out of his throat the way it's supposed to. At least this part comes back: if you can't speak when they make a question, you nod. Happy nods. She shows all her teeth ("See, Brent?") and he shows all his teeth right back to her in . . . Oh! This is a smile. You do it because they expect it. You always did. From nowhere Happy can name, there comes a string of words: *Songs my mother taught me.* Now, why does this make his heart break? He doesn't know what it means and he doesn't want to know where it's coming from. *Songs my mother . . .*

She touches his hair. Parts of Happy go soft and—oh! Another gets hard. Smile for her, she is soft in interesting places. At eighteen Happy feels like a puppy, but he isn't, not really.

Then she prods him with her toe. Her voice drops so he will know she is serious. "Okay then, get up."

Slowly Happy rolls over and rises on his hind legs, although he is not all that accustomed. Susan shows her teeth at him, but in a nice way, and her voice lightens. "That's better. Let's get him in the car."

With wolves, you are always certain. Your wolf mother loves you. Get out of line and she will swat you. Grey Sonia did it as needed. Get too far out of line and your father will kill you. Happy bears the marks of Timbo's fangs in his tender hide—this torn ear, that spot on his flank where the gash is healing.

If you are male and live long enough, you will have to kill your father. It is the way of the pack.

The wolves aren't Happy's real parents. In a way this is news to him, but from the beginning he had suspicions. Happy's captor—er, rescuer—doesn't know what Happy knows, and what the boy knows is buried so deep in early childhood that it is only now coming to the surface. All his life Happy has run after the hope that the next thing will be better.

He only left the woods after Timbo tried to kill him.

He thought his real family would be kinder, although for reasons he only partially understands, he had forgotten them.

In fact, he was the last child in a big family. Happy made one too many, and the mother put him in clean clothes when they went out but at home he was forgotten, sitting for hours in his own messes. She yelled at him for being in the way. One did things that hurt, but he will not remember which person. When he cried nobody cared. They didn't much notice. He wasn't supposed to hear his mother snap, "And this one's my mistake."

Words are like weapons, no wonder he forgot.

The night the wolves took him, Happy was alone in his little stroller in a mall parking lot, hours after the family car pulled out with everyone else inside. He was so thoroughly combed and scrubbed that it may have been accident, not neglect, that found him there in the dark, crying. A central fact about Happy is that he doesn't know.

He cried and cried. Then the wolves swarmed down on Happy in his stroller and the bawling toddler lifted his arms to them. The big males paced, slaving. The child didn't read their watchful eyes but Sonia knew. She turned on them, bunched and snarling. They backed away. Then she nosed Happy. He looked into her yellow eyes and clamped his arms around her magnificent neck. He buried his face deep in her thick white ruff. Timbo picked Happy out of the stroller and dropped him at Sonia's feet. The pack took the message and backed off. He has been running with them ever since.

The first thing Sonia did was rip off his little outfit with her teeth and lick him raw so he would smell of her and not the other pack, the one he quickly forgot. The only thing left of them was the scrap of metal dangling from his neck. Timbo wanted that off too. Even though he was the leader, Sonia rolled back her lips and snarled. It stayed. Happy ran with the wolves but the cold square tap-tapped on naked flesh, a sign that he was different. Sonia fed her new pup off her sagging belly and licked his tears away. Then she dragged him through dirt and rotting dead things until he was fit to run with the other cubs and from that night on she was his mother. The rule of the pack is: never get between a cub and its mother. He knew he was loved.

Timbo did not love Happy, but he protected him.

In time the pack forgot that he was not one of them. Howling to stay in touch, they ran at night, *ah-whooo*, ranging wide, *ah-whooooooo*, and with the knife he found on a dead man, Happy was as good a hunter as any. Even Timbo came to respect him. This, he thought, was all there was to life. The howling and the hunting, Happy and his litter-mates running free in the night.

When you are raised by wolves but are not one of them, time is never what you think. You do not age at the same rate.

Happy he was, yet living with the wolves, nursing injuries when his litter-mates grew up and the challenges began, Happy thought: *This can't be my real family. Some day my father the duke and my mother the movie star will come for me.* Where did these words come from? Who were his people, really?

The litters he ran with grew up much, much faster than Happy.

It was a mystery. The other cubs grew tall and rangy while he was still an awkward pup. They flirted and rutted, things Happy thought he understood and longed for vaguely but was not built to do. He was shaped all wrong, too young in ways Sonia would not explain to him; she was, after all, a mother and there are things mothers keep from you until it's time. His litter-mates frolicked and did things Happy was not yet old enough to do. When he tried to play they snapped: *don't bother me.* In time, he played with their cubs. Their cubs grew up. Sonia got old. Then Sonia died, and with Sonia gone, craggy Timbo began stalking him, licking his chops.

Now Happy was old enough to do all those things he had been too young to do before, and Timbo?

Timbo had to die. Happy had reached the age of kill or be killed. Wolves know that when you are grown, you have to kill your father. Kill him before he kills you.

He thought he could take Timbo in a fight and so he scent-marked a tree, making clear his intentions. The wolf's challenge!

He bunched himself as Timbo circled, snarling. Imagine his surprise. The gouge in his flank goes all the way from *here* down to *here*. Now, a wolf can lick all the hurt places, but Happy wasn't built to reach the places wolves can reach without trying. Pain drove him sobbing out of the woods.

When you have been raised by wolves, you know what to expect.

Foolish to expect better of people.

Nursing the fresh gash in his flank, he watched the building, men walking back in front of lighted windows. He heard a sound like a forgotten lullaby: human voices. He limped out of the woods, whimpering, "Oh, oh, oh." Then, when he least expected it, a word came to him. He pointed his nose at the sky. "Oh, help!"

He expected helping hands, kind words, but big men clattered out shouting, "Stop where you are!" They were nothing like he expected. Happy froze.

Somebody yelled, "What is that?"

Somebody else yelled, "Some kind of *animal*."

They were so angry! *This is nothing like I thought.*

Happy did what wolves do when they are in trouble. He howled. *Ah-whoooo*. One by one his brothers responded, but the howls were scattered, the howlers far away. Wolves know never to come out of the woods, no matter who is calling. *Ah-whoooooooooooo!*

The men pulled shields over their faces and raised their guns. Guns: a word Happy didn't quite know. In the struggle, the chain around his neck parted and the only scrap of his old life fell into their hands. Why did he imagine it made him special?

He limped back into the woods. The other wolves—his brothers!—smelled men on him. He was ruined for life in the woods and there was as well . . . what? The curiosity. When the men fell on Happy, he felt his flesh smacking into human flesh and there was no difference between them. Even clothed, his attackers were more like Happy than Happy was like the wolves. Like the missing limb that hurts at night, he felt the ghost family. Wolves run in packs or they prowl alone; they kill and are killed and that's the end of it. Men have families.

Night after night Happy doubled back on the clearing. He was drawn by half-remembered smells—hot food, the scent of bulky, not-wolf bodies—and sounds: music and forks clattering, the buddabuddabudda of low, not-wolf voices. Circling, Happy yearned for something he missed terribly. As for what . . . he was not certain.

Alone, Happy howled to the heavens. He wanted to bring out Timbo, even though he knew Timbo would kill him. *Ah-whooooo*. If they fought to the death, one way or the other it would end his confusion. Happy's howling filled the woods but not one wolf howled in reply. *Ah-whoooooooo!*

The loneliness was intense.

This is why Happy did what wolves never do. For the second time, he left the woods. For a long time, he circled the police station. Then he dropped to his haunches on the front walk and howled to heaven. He howled for all he was worth. Unless he was howling for everything he was losing.

Now look.

\* \* \*

The needle Brent used to get him out of the airport left Happy inert, but aware. They are riding along, he and Brent and this Susan, he can smell her. The car is much smaller than the van that took him to the hospital after the fight at the police station. They sewed him up and Brent came. Happy did not know him, but he knew him. He rolled off the bed and fell into a crouch, ready to lunge. Guards came. He struggled but the doctors gave him to Brent anyway. They said he was next of kin. Family.

... Brent?

It was on the dogtag. That's Brent's word for it. But why was Brent's name on the dogtag? *Am I his pet?* Happy wonders. *Do I belong to him?* He is no dog. He runs with wolves.

He does not like Brent. Keep your eyes shut, Happy. Keep them closed and he won't know you're in here.

He is riding along between them. The nice soft woman is soft, but not as nice as he thought. She says over Happy's head, "Why in hell didn't you hose him down before we got in the car?"

"It's not my fault he stinks."

"You could have put him in the trunk!"

Smelly breath mists Happy's face as Brent peers at him, but he keeps his eyes clenched. "Lie down with wolves and you smell like one. You hear?"

"Save your breath, he's out cold." The woman riding along next to him, what does this Brent call her? Susan. Susan gives Happy a little shake; his head rolls back and settles on her arm. "If you want him smiling on TV, you'd better revive him."

"Not now, Suze. *Live at Five* next Thursday."

"Like they aren't already waiting at Chateau Marmont?"

"No way! We can't go public until Dad makes the deal." *Dad*. The word Happy refused to remember. His teeth clash and his hackles rise. It is hard to keep from growling.

"You should have thought of that at the airport. Mr. Show biz." She goes on in Brent's voice, "'I rescued him.' Like you didn't see the phones and camcorders. Screen shots. Everybody knows!"

"Well, tough. Nobody sees him until the press conference. Dad is talking eight figures."

Happy's insides shift. He is confused. Wolves don't think in figures.

Brent barks, "Driver, get off at National."

"What are you *thinking?*"

"Gonna hide him!"

"Not in this town," Susan says. Distracted, she's let parts of herself flow into Happy. She thinks he is asleep. Parts of him flow back and she lets him.

"Outskirts. Inland empire. The valley."

She says, "Too close." Happy leans a little closer; she shrugs him off, but he slips back and she lets him. It is hard for him to keep from smiling. They ride along like this for a while. At last she says thoughtfully, "Your mom stayed back in Caverness, right?"

"She did," Brent says and then he just stops talking.

The car rounds a corner and Happy leans into the body next to his, but

only a little bit. He can feel her voice vibrating in his bones. "Then take him to your mom's."

Warm, she is so warm.

"No way. She hasn't forgiven me for losing him."

Something changes in the car. "You lost him?"

Happy's ears prick.

The woman has asked a question that Brent won't answer. He says instead, "Come on, Susan. What are we going to do?"

"You lost your very own brother?"

"Not really. Well, sort of."

Happy is trying to make his mouth into the right shape to frame the big question. Even if he could, he knows not to bring it out. It is disturbing.

"Brent, what were you *thinking*?"

The fat man whines, "Mom *said* he was a mistake. I thought she would thank me, but she freaked."

Mom. Another word Happy can't parse. Oh. Same as mother. That word. Soft, he remembers. Other things. He will not remember other things.

"She never forgave Dad either."

"So he lives in L.A. Got that." Susan adds dryly, "Too bad you can't divorce your kids."

"Could we not talk about this please?"

She stiffens—*is it something I did?* "Back there." Her voice goes up a notch. "Look. Tell me that's not a mobile unit."

"Holy crap, it's TV Eight. Driver, take Laurel Canyon."

The car goes around many curves and up, up, higher than Happy remembers being, and whenever they round a curve too fast he bumps against Susan's soft parts like a sleeper with no control over what he is doing, but in all the uphill and downhill and veering around corners he never, ever bumps Brent, not even accidentally.

He is aware of a hand waving in front of his closed eyes. A pinch. He wants to play dead but he can't stop himself from flinching. The needle bites. The world goes away again. He can't be sure about the days or the nights, which they are or how many.

Happy sleeps and he wakes up, then he sleeps again and in the hours they drive he can never be certain which is which, or whether the woman is touching him by accident or because she intends it.

At last the car crunches uphill and stops for the last time. Happy's head comes up. The smells when Brent hustles him out of the car and hauls him to his feet on the hard, hard street are terrible and familiar. They are climbing steps to a wooden . . . porch. Happy knows almost all the words now. Brent slaps the door and a remote bell rings. Footsteps come.

Terrified, he begins to struggle.

"Brent, he's waking up!"

"Not for long."

Happy yips as the needle goes into his butt. What they do and say when the door opens is forever lost to him.



When he wakes everything is as it was and nothing is the same. Will his life always be like this? Happy is curled up in his room. He knows it is his room because it used to be his room in the old life, and he knows from the sights and smells that nothing has changed here. It feels good and bad, lying in the old place. From here he can see the pretend bearskin rug in the center of the room with its plastic fangs and empty glass eyes, and lodged in the corner, the faded pink volleyball that he remembers from his very first time on the floor in this room and his very last day here.

When wolves quit the lair they stalk away leaving it untouched because they are done with it forever; they do not expect to come this way again. Is this what not-wolf mothers do?

Not-wolf mothers leave the lost son's room exactly as it was in hopes he will come back, but there is no way Happy can know this. He has no idea who he is or why he feels both good and bad about being back here, although he is a little frightened. He doesn't know why all this makes him miss Sonia so terribly or why, on that night so long ago, his hateful big brother slammed the door to the family car and let them drive away without him.

Brother. That's what Brent is.

Oh.

Happy would throw back his head and howl for Sonia but his hideout is constricted, the woods are lost to him and Sonia is dead now. He could howl for this other mother but before, when he was small and crying out lonely, she was a long time coming and when she did. . . . There are things you don't remember and things you don't want to know.

Can you want to belong in two places at once and know you don't belong in either?

At least Happy is safe. When he came to, instinct sent him off the bed where they'd dumped him and under here, where they won't see him before he sees them. Holed up, he counts the cobwebs hanging from rusting springs. He wants to weep for the blue dogs and pink teddies cavorting on the plastic mattress cover. He is under his old crib.

When you can't go back to being what you used to be, you go back to what you were in the beginning. You were safe because she loved you, and Happy does not know whether he means the old mother, or Sonia.

The sounds in the house are so different from the crackle and whisper of the woods that it takes time to name them. The hum of the refrigerator, the washing machine grinding because—Happy looks down—they have changed his hospital rags for grey stuff like the clothes—clothes!—he used to wear when he was a . . . The bark of the furnace kicking in. A telephone ringing, ringing ringing and soft voices: women talking, a strange man's voice downstairs in the hall. Brent is arguing with the other.

The smells in this house at this moment in his life are enough to break Happy's heart. He can smell mold in the foundations, laundry products; dust, in this room in particular; there is the residue of memory and oh, God . . .—*God?*—there is the smell of something cooking. Whatever else is going on in this place he used to know so well and had forgotten completely, *Mom* is baking brownies. Everything waters. Happy's mouth, his nose, his eyes.



\* \* \*

It's getting dark, but nobody comes. Cramped as he is, stuck under the crib for too long when he is used to running free in the woods, Happy is restless and twitching. He thought by this time Brent would be in here raging; they could have fought. He could have killed the brother. Unless Brent jabbed another dart into Happy and dragged him out from under here. Instead the shouting stayed downstairs, sliding into the low, grating whine of a long argument. Then doors slammed and the cars roared away. Now there is no more talking. The machines have stopped. There is almost-silence in the house, except for the stir of a body he knows, approaching. What does he remember from the last time he heard her footsteps? Nothing he chooses to remember. Trembling, he pulls himself out from under the crib just long enough to run his hand along the bedroom door. He finds the lock. He loves the click.

There is a long silence in the hall outside his room. Then there is the soft footfall as she goes away.

Alone in the tight space he has created, Happy considers. Wolves are taught to lay back in this situation, and he is more wolf than anything else. He's been out cold for a long time, and there are problems. Wolves wake up ravenous. Happy hasn't fed since he came to in the crate and emptied his dish. Another thing: a wolf never fouls the den where he is sleeping. When the old house has been still for a long time he eases out from under the crib, unlocks the door and leaves the room.

Where Happy loped along on all fours when he ran with the pack, race memory kicks in, now that he is here. This place he hoped to forget was not built for wolves. He stands and prowls the house on bare feet. She has left food: some kind of meat on the kitchen table, brownies. He empties the plate, pulling strings of plastic wrap out of the half-chewed chocolate squares before he swallows them. Now, the other thing? As Sonia's cub he never fouled the lair. There is a bathroom just off the kitchen. Happy cringes. What was he supposed to do back then, when he was small and trapped in here? Who used to hit him and hit him for forgetting?

He touches the nail where the belt used to hang and the ghost family rises up like the missing limb miraculously restored. Growling, he quits the house.

Can you ever walk out of your old skin and back into the woods where you were so happy, running with the wolves? There are no woods outside this house, just streets and cement sidewalks and metal fences around house after house after identical house; there are few trees and no hillside which means no caves, no undergrowth and no place to dig, where he can pull in brush to cover himself; it is worrisome and sad. The urban sky is like a cup with Happy trapped under it. He relieves himself and goes back inside. The old room is safe, now that he knows he can lock it.

His days don't change.

At night he goes out to eat what she leaves and to relieve himself. One night it was a meat pie, another, a whole ham.

People come. Sometimes they call outside his room, but Happy will not

answer. The wolf doesn't howl unless there is another like him out there, howling or yipping the reply. Brent comes, but not Susan. In the long periods he spends curled under the crib, Happy thinks about this. Her body, expanding with every breath as they rode along in the car. The way it felt, and how he misses it.

If he can't do what wolves do, he understands, he wants to do what he *can* do with Brent's woman. How the parts go together remains a mystery; he only knows what he needs. Brent comes with a doctor, a talking-doctor, he says through the locked door. The doctor talks for a long time, but wolves have no need for words. The doctor goes away. Brent comes with a man who promises money. When you have nothing, you need nothing. Brent comes with another man, who makes threats. Wolves will not be threatened. When you are threatened, you go to ground and stay there. They go away. Brent comes back. He shouts through the locked door. "Just tell us what you want and I'll bring it! Anything, I promise, if you'll just come out so we can get started."

There is one thing, but Happy will not say it.

The brother hits a whine that Happy remembers from the time he refuses to remember. Oh. *That* Brent. This one. Same as he ever was, just older.

Brent snarls, "Dammit to hell, are you in there?"

No words needed here, either. None spoken.

Brent comes back with a woman. The scent brings Happy's head up. It is a woman. "He's in there? Why is he in there when he knows I'm out here?" She goes on in a loud, harsh voice. "*Do you know who I am?*"

It's the wrong woman.

"Listen, baby brother. This is your new agent standing out here in the cold. If you know what's good for you, come out and say hello to Marla Parterre. She can make or break you."

Time passes.

"She's from C.A.A.!"

The agent goes away.

The mother comes. *Mhmhmmm*.

Brent shouts. "How can we sell this story if he won't come out? Dammit, Mom . . ."

She says in the old tone that makes Happy tremble, "Don't you dare talk to your mother like that." He knows her voice, but he always did. He just doesn't know what she used to say to him.

"I'm calling Dad," Brent says. "Dad will get him out."

Then his mother says, "Your father is not coming back here, Brent."

"But Mom, he got us front money in six figures, and we have to . . ." Figures. Happy is troubled by the figures. Skaters, he thinks, short skirts, girls gliding in circles, and wonders how he knows. Women, he thinks, trembling. With their pretty figures.

"No." Her voice is huge. "Not after what he did. No!"

Brent brings a locksmith. There is talk of breaking in. She says, No, she says, over her dead body. Will Brent kill her? Happy shivers. They argue. She uses that huge voice on Brent and they go away. She bakes. Sometimes now, she leaves the food outside his door, hoping he'll come out to

see. Happy lies low until she sighs and takes the untouched tray back to the kitchen.

At night she lingers in the hallway outside the room. She does not speak. He won't, or can't. Sometimes he hears her crying.

Happy waits. Sooner or later she always goes away. She leaves things on the kitchen table. Meat, which Happy devours. Fruit, which he ignores. Something she baked. She leaves the door to that old, bad bathroom open so he won't have to go outside to relieve himself. What's the matter with her, did she forget? The sight of the toilet, the naked hook where the belt hung, make Happy tremble.

Outside is worse than inside. Nights like these make Happy want to throw back his head and howl. Alone in these parts, he could howl to the skies and never hear their voices. The other wolves are deep in the old woods, and he is far, far away. He wants to cry out for Sonia, for the past, when everything was simple, but one sound will bring police down on him with their bats and rifles, visors on bug helmets covering their faces.

Happy knows what wolves know. You never, ever break cover.

Wolves know what Happy is only now learning. He can't go back! Happy's feet are soft and his muscles are slack from days under the crib. He'd never make it and if he did, Timbo would outrun him in seconds. Timbo would kill him in one lunge, and even if he could kill Timbo? His parts and the bitch wolves' parts don't match. They have forgotten he was ever one of them.

He sits on his haunches and tries to think. He is distracted by the buzz of blue lights on poles overhead, where he is used to looking up and seeing trees; by a sky so milky with reflected glare that stars don't show; by the play of strident human voices in the houses all around, the mechanical sounds of a hundred household objects and the rush of cars on the great road that brought them here. Looking up at the house, he groans.

He doesn't belong in there.

He doesn't belong out here, either.

He gets up. Sighs. Stands back. Upstairs in the house, there is a single light. She is awake. Now he knows, and knowing hurts somehow. She doesn't go into her lair and sleep after she leaves Happy's door the way he thought she did. She sits up all night waiting. He steals back inside and goes upstairs to his room. Inside, he closes the door. Tonight, he will not turn the lock.

After not very long—did she hear or does she just know?—the bedroom door opens. She says his name.

"Happy?"

He always knew Happy was his name. This is just the first time he's heard it spoken since he joined the wolves and made Sonia his mother. Does Brent not know? The name Brent calls him is different. Is this big, leaden woman who smells like despair the only one who knows who he really is? In the hospital where the police took him, Brent shouted at the doctor like a pet owner claiming a dog that had strayed. "Olmstead. It's right here on his tag! Olmstead. Frederick."

Her voice is soft as the darkness. "Oh, Happy. I'm so glad you came back."

There is another of those terrible long silences in which he hears her shifting from foot to foot in the dark, pretending she's not crying.

She says, "You don't have to come out from under there if you don't want to."

She says, "Are you okay?"

It's been a long time since words came out of Happy; he only had a few when they lost him. He isn't ready. Will he ever be?

She says, "Is it okay if I sit down on the bed? I mean, since you're not using it?"

Words. He is thinking about words. He knows plenty now, all that talk going on outside his locked door. He has heard dozens. He could spit out a word for her if he wanted, but which one? He waits until she gets tired of him waiting.

She says softly, "I'm sorry about everything."

Then she says, all in a rush, "Oh Happy. Can you ever forgive me?"

This is not a question Happy can answer.

There is a lot of nothing in the silence that follows. She is breathing the way Sonia did before she died. It's a rasp of pain, but the mother smells all right to Happy. Wolves know nothing of the pain of waiting, nor do they know anything about the pain of guilt.

Her voice shakes in a way he is not used to. "Son?"

Son. It does not parse. Happy rummages through all his words, but there is no right one.

The first morning light is showing in the window; Happy sees it touch the fake fur of the ruggy bear; he sees it outlining the hands she keeps folded on her plump knees and he watches as it picks out every vein in her sad, swelling ankles. She says, "It's all my fault, you know."

What should he do now, bare all his teeth the way they do, to show her he's friendly? Beg her to go on? Howl until she stops? He doesn't know.

She says, "I never should have had you." Slumped on the edge of the bed she leans sideways and tilts her head, trying to see under the crib where Happy's green eyes glint. He makes no expression a human could recognize, although Sonia would know it without question. She says, "Poor little thing."

A sound stirs the air, a kind of shudder. He wonders but does not ask, *Mother, did you sob?*

Her head comes up. "Happy?"

Startled, Happy looks inside himself.—*Did I?* There is nothing he has to say to her.

Then she just begins. "You don't know what it's like living with a man who beats you. I was pregnant with Brent and our parents forced the marriage, crazy thing to happen in this day and time, like it ruined his life to marry me, we had too many babies, and who—*who* got me pregnant every time? Do you see what I mean?"

Happy won't speak. The words come so fast that he chooses not to understand them. *Ow, it hurts!*

Never mind, nothing he says or does not say will stop her. "Hal hated his life so he drank, and the more he drank the more he hated it so he drank some more and the more he drank, the madder he got and nothing

I could do or say would make him happy. Every little thing I did used to make him mad at me. The madder he got the more he hit me, but he never hit me when I was pregnant. Oh, Happy, do you understand?"

For another long time, they are both silent.

A long sigh comes ripping out of her. "You do what you have to, just to keep it from happening again. When anger takes hold like that, it has to come out somewhere. Look." She holds up a crooked wrist; even from here it looks wrong. She touches a spot on her temple; she doesn't have to tell Happy about the long white scar under the hair.

He tried so hard not to remember, but he remembers. On his belly under the crib, Happy watches her over ridged knuckles.

Again. She says it again. "He never hit me when I was pregnant." Her breath shudders. "So I had you. I'm so sorry!"

Happy strains to make out what she's trying to tell him but there is no way of translating it.

"I tried. I even named you after him!"

Frederick, he supposes. He supposes it was on the dogtag, but Brent says *his* name was on the dogtag, and Happy? Frederick is not his name.

In the still air of the bedroom, her voice is sad and thin. "My four big boys fought back when he hit them, so I had you. Anything to stop him. But this time." That sigh. "He didn't stop. Forgive me, Happy. I did what you do to make it through. I couldn't take it!"

The story she is telling is sad, but it's only a story. Wolves know that fathers aren't the only ones that hurt you.

"You cried. you cried so much. He got so mad. He came at me. He kept coming at me and oh God, oh, Happy. I put you in front of me."

Happy flinches.

"I couldn't watch. I left him to it." Relieved, she says in a light voice, "And that was it." As if it's all she needs to do.

Fine. If she is done, then, she'll leave. As soon as she leaves he'll get up and lock the door.

Then, just when he thinks it's over and he can forget this, she groans. "I'm so sorry, son."

There is another of the long, painful pauses that wolves prefer to using words. Silence is clear, where words are ambiguous.

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She says, "I never knew what he was doing. I didn't want to know."

She says, "I know, I know, I should have left him, but where can a woman go with four little boys and a baby? I should have kicked him out, but how would I feed my children then?"

The silence.

"So you do forgive me, right?"

*Forgive* is not a word wolves know.

"Right?"

He won't move or speak. Why should he?

"These things happen, son. Things happen when people are stretched too far and their love is stretched too thin. Oh, *please* try to understand."

There is a long silence while she thinks and Happy thinks.

Just when he's beginning to hope she's run out of words forever, she says in a voice so light that it floats far over his head, "Then you got lost. And everything changed. He got himself a nice new wife and moved to Hollywood. After everything I did to make him happy. The others grew up and moved away. Until you came, I didn't have anything."

Happy doesn't expect to speak, but he does. The words that have been stacked in his head for years pop out like quarters out of a coin return.

"You didn't look for me, did you." It is not a question.

She sobs. "You don't know what it's like."

He does.

After a while she goes away.

Happy slinks to the door and locks it even before he hears her stumbling downstairs, sobbing.

"Can I come in?" Her voice is sweet. Just the way he remembers her. Even through the door, Susan is soft and he will always remember that body. He almost forgets himself and answers. Happy is stopped by the fact that except for the slip with the mother, he hasn't spoken. There are too many words backed up in him. He can't get them in order, much less let them out. He just doesn't have the equipment.

Instead he hitches across the floor the way he did when he was two and sits with his back against the door, putting his head to the wood. Feeling her. He feels her outline pressed to the other side of the panel, her heart beating. Susan, breathing.

"Don't worry," she says, "I understand. I just want you to come out so we can be together and be happy."

His fingers creep along the door.

"Happy," she says, and he will not know whether she is talking about their future or using his name, which is his secret. "You know, you're really a very lovely man. It's a shame for you to be shut up in there when you could come out and enjoy the world!"

Swaying slightly in time with that musical voice, he toys with the lock. He can't, he could, he wants to open that door and do something about the way he is feeling. With Susan, he won't have to wonder how the parts fit together.

Like a gifted animal trainer she goes on, about his bright hair, about

how lucky she felt when she first saw him; she is lirting now. "It's sunny today, perfect weather, and oh, sweetie, there's going to be a party in the garden!"

Then he hears a little stir in the hall. Someone else out there with her, breathing.

"A party in your honor. Cake, sweetie, and champagne, have you ever had champagne? You're going to love it . . ." He does indeed hear music. Someone tapping a microphone. Voices in the garden. Behind Susan, someone is muttering. She breaks off. "Brent, I am *not* going to tell him about the people from Miramax! Not until we get him out of there!"

The brother. Happy shuts down. What else would he do after what Brent did to him? Things in this room, he realizes; Brent was that much older. Brent giving him a mean, sly look on his last night in this world he outgrew, letting their father hit the gas on the minivan and drive away without him.

After a long time, when it becomes clear that there's no change in the situation, Susan gets up off her knees—he can feel every move she makes—and leans the whole of that soft body against the wood. He stands too, so that in a way, they are together. She says in a tone that makes clear that they will indeed lie down together too, "Champagne, and when it's over, you and I . . ."

There is the sound of a little struggle. Brent barks a warning. "Ten minutes, Frederick Olmstead. Ten minutes more and we break down the door and drag you out."

He does not have to go to the window to hear the speech Brent makes to the people assembled. He can hear them muttering. He smells them all. He hears their secret body parts moving. They are drinking champagne in the garden. Then it changes. There is a new voice. Ugly. Different from the buddabuddabudda of ordinary people talking.

"Thank you for coming and thank you for your patience. Okay, Brent. Where is he?"

*It's him.*

Brett whines, "I told you, Dad, I couldn't . . ."

"Then I will."

Another voice. The mother. "No, Fred. Not this time."

There is a smack. A thud. Under the window, the father raises his head and howls, "Two minutes, son. I'm warning you."

Happy's hackles rise. His lips curl back from bared fangs as in the garden under the window the mother cries, "I told you never to come here!"

There is a stir; something happens and the mother is silenced.

Him.

He commands the crowd. "Give me a minute and I'll bring the wolf boy down for his very first interview."

His father comes.

He will find that Happy has unlocked the door for him.

Big man, but not as big as Happy remembers him. Big smile on his face, which has been surgically enhanced, although Happy will not know



it. Smooth, beautifully tanned under the expensively cropped hair, it is nothing like the angry face Happy remembers. The big, square teeth are white, whiter than Timbo's fangs. Even the eyes are a fresh, technically augmented color. Blue shirt, open at the collar. Throat exposed, as wolves will do when they want you to know that they do not intend to harm you. Nice suit, although Happy has no way of knowing.

"Son," he says in a smooth, glad tone that has sealed deals and gotten meetings with major players all over greater Los Angeles. "You know your father loves you."

*This is nothing like love.*

Caught between then and now, between what he was and what he thinks he is, Happy does what he has to.

He knows what all wolves know. If you are male and live long enough, you will have to kill your father.

It doesn't take long.

Brent finds the door locked when he comes upstairs to find out how it's going. He says through the closed door, "Everything okay in there?"

Although Happy has not spoken in all these days, he has listened carefully. Now he says in the father's voice, "This is going to take longer than I thought. Reschedule for tomorrow. My place."

There is a little silence while Brent considers.

Happy is stronger than Timbo now. Louder. "Now clear out, and take everybody with you."

It is night again. The mother knocks. Happy has mauled the body, as Timbo would, but he will not eat. There is no point to it.

"Can I come in?"

He allows it.

There will be no screaming and no reproaches. She stands quietly, studying the body.

After a long time she says, "Okay. Yes. He deserved it."

When you remember old hurts you remember them all, not just the ones people want you to. Therefore Happy says the one thing about this that he will ever say to her:

"He wasn't the only one."

"Oh, Happy," she says. "Oh God." She isn't begging for her life, she is inquiring.

It is a charged moment.

There are memories that you can't prevent and then there are memories you refuse to get back, and over these, you have some power. This is the choice Happy has to make but he is confused now by memories of Sonia. Her tongue was rough. She was firm, but loving. This mother waits. What will he do? She means no harm. She wants to protect him. Poised between this room and freedom in the woods, between the undecided and the obvious, he doesn't know.

What he does know is that no matter what she did to you and no matter how hard to forgive, you will forget what your mother did to you because she is your mother. ○

# DRAW

Pati Nagle

**Pati Nagle writes science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, and whatever else strikes her fancy. She lives in the mountains of central New Mexico, surrounded by trees, birds, many rabbits, and coyotes. Being a desert rat, she is eternally fascinated by the ocean, hence this story—her first for *Asimov's*.**

**D**imitri noticed the time counter was way past 21:00, and paused his Robo-Warriors Invasion game. Dad should have been back from his rounds by now.

He took off his headset and gloves and looked around the apartment like maybe he'd missed something, but he knew Dad would have said hi when he'd come in. Dad would have rubbed Dimitri's head and probably thrown off his score.

Dimitri got up and went to the big observation bubble that stuck out into the ocean from the living room. There was a cushion in it and he knelt on it, his breath misting on the cold surface of the bubble as he leaned against the thick plex, peering into the dark water outside. It was night up top, and the light from the apartment only reached a short distance past the window. He could see sand drifting around on the ocean floor, stirred by the ever-restless current, and he could just see the edge of the kelp beds beyond the nearest pump, fading into the blackness.

He shivered and backed away from the bubble. He was old enough not to be scared of the ocean, but at night it still bugged him sometimes. He didn't like being alone in the apartment after dark.

He took his comcard out of his pocket and stroked it, then said, "Dad." Held the card to his ear and waited, but his dad didn't answer. After five tones the message box kicked in and Dimitri disconnected.

Could there be something wrong? Dad had gone out to do the evening check on the pump system. That was part of his job as maintainer of the desalination plant. He checked all the pumps and the seals first thing every morning and last thing at night. Often Dimitri went with him on the morning run, but not at night.

Not at night, when the great, dark vastness of the ocean could swallow you faster than you could blink. Not at night, when the hunters were out, giant shadows sliding through the water. Dimitri shivered, thinking about his dad out there alone in the dark.

"Stop it," he said aloud. This was no time to be giving himself the willies.

He called up some zaffa music to cheer him up and went over to Dad's monitor station to see if there were any alarms blinking on the diagram of the plant. Nothing.

He checked his message box, but there was nothing from Dad. His friend Collin had left a message about their homework assignment. That was it.

Maybe he should call Collin back and ask if Collin's dad would come over. Except Collin's dad wasn't an outside worker, he was a city administrator. He probably wouldn't know what to do other than call emergency services, and Dimitri could do that himself.

Was it an emergency, though?

It was starting to feel like one, but Dimitri didn't want to make a fool of himself and call out the rescue team when they weren't really needed. Dad always scoffed at people who did that. Usually they were new to Pacific City, recent arrivals who panicked over some simple problem.

Dimitri tried calling his dad's com again, then looked all over the apartment for a note or a message, then called a third time. He checked the equipment bay by the dive hatch. Dad's wetsuit and tank were gone, so he'd definitely gone out.

His own, smaller wetsuit hung there, gaping at him. Get into it, a whisper in the back of his head urged him. A wave of fear bubbled up through his limbs.

Dimitri frowned and turned away. He hadn't tried everything else yet.

He went back to the monitor station and started cycling through the cameras, looking for his dad at any of the sites they covered. There were lots of cameras—one at every critical junction or piece of equipment in the desalination plant—and none of them showed a diver. A spotted shark glided by on one screen and made Dimitri jump, then the cycle clicked to the next camera.

He could call Dad's boss, maybe. Except Mr. Whitmore lived topside, so all he'd be able to do would be call Pacific City emergency, too. And it was night. Dad might get mad if Dimitri bothered his boss at night.

"Cameras minimize," Dimitri said.

The cycling images retreated to a small window in one corner of the monitor station, and the plant diagram returned to its normal position in the middle of the holotank. Dimitri rotated the diagram, looking for anything that might have caught his dad's attention, but saw nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

He shut off the music and sat down at the monitor station, straining his brain for anything else to check. His gaze drifted over the holographic icons arrayed along the tabletop, and caught on one shaped like a red wrench.

"Maintenance log!"

The wrench turned brighter in response. Dimitri smacked his temple for not thinking of it sooner.

"Dork!"

The station pinged a query.

"Ignore. Maximize maintenance log."

A spreadsheet rose up in front of the plant diagram. Dimitri scrolled it to the most recent entries. There was one from just after 19:00 hours:

PERMEABILITY QUERY ON INTAKE FILTER 27-A.

Dimitri brought up the status screen for intake 27, one of the fifty giant pipes that drew water into the plant. The volume stats were way down. Frowning, Dimitri ran the numbers back and found they were even worse than they'd been at 19:00.

It meant the water coming in that pipe wasn't flowing as fast as it should be. That's all Dimitri knew, but it was enough. Dad would have checked on it while he was making his rounds.

"Cameras maximize."

Dimitri checked the location chart and brought up the camera aimed at intake 27. It was mounted on the screen cage and gave an angled view of the meter-wide pipe.

He sucked in a sharp breath. The screen capping pipe 27 had a large hole ripped in it.

"Camera . . . fifty-two," he said, glancing at the chart again.

The image switched to the access hatch in the screen cage. It was hanging open. Bad.

"Backpage and zoom."

Back on the pipe, the image moved in closer to the torn screen. Dimitri couldn't see down into the pipe, but he did see something dangling from its rim. Zooming in even closer, he realized it was a grappling harness, the gear that Dad and the other maintenance techs used whenever they needed to do things around the pipes, to keep from getting sucked into them by the draw.

"Shit. Oh, shit!"

Dimitri looked at the chronometer: 21:43. His father would soon be out of air, if he wasn't already.

Too late to call for help—it would take the rescue team too long to get there. Shut down the plant? He'd watched Dad do it and thought he remembered how, but he wasn't authorized. It wasn't something you just did. It cost thousands of dollars to shut the system down, and thousands more to start it up again.

And he didn't absolutely *know* his dad was down in the pipe. He just thought so.

No time, no time. Dimitri ran for the equipment bay and called rescue while he was struggling into his wetsuit. His explanation was kind of crazy and broken, but he got the idea across.

"Okay, stay there," the dispatcher told him. "I'm scrambling a rescue team now."

"I've got to take him some air!"

"It's better if you just stay there. The team will be out there in five minutes."

Screw that. Dad could suffocate in five minutes. He could be suffocating *now*.

"Just stay calm and keep talking to me," the dispatcher said.

"Right."

Dimitri ran through the safety checklist as fast as he dared, and slid his comcard into the headset just before he pulled it on. The headset molded itself to within a centimeter of his face and threw up its array of diagnostic displays. With a flick of his eyes he sent them to the background, then took down a spare grappling harness from the gear bay.

He had to cinch all the straps and buckles down to their tightest, and the harness still fit a little loose on him, but it would have to do. Grabbing a full pony bottle of air, he cycled the dive hatch and went in the water.

Cold and dark. It was always cold, but the dark made him gulp his air faster than he should. His com lost the dispatcher and he kicked up to touch the outside of the structure and reacquire the signal.

"Are you still there?" said the dispatcher. It was a woman. He hadn't even noticed that before.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"You sound like you're breathing hard. Try to calm down, okay?"

"Okay."

Keeping contact with the building, he worked his way out from under it and up the side. The plant stretched away into the darkness. Off to the left, the lights of Pacific City glowed hazily through the dome. He'd rather have swum toward the lights, but that wasn't his goal. Turning away from the city, he turned on his lamps and kicked off toward the plant.

He brushed his hands against the uppermost pipes as he crossed the massive assembly of pumps and filters that made up the plant. He felt his tension growing as he approached the edge of the draw field. The light from his lamps picked up the dull red edge of the screen cage, a huge, mesh box that surrounded all the intakes for the plant. He reached the cage and drifted to a stop, one hand against the mesh.

Really a first-level filter, the screen cage kept anything larger than a centimeter away from the intake pipes, keeping out plant matter, fish, other critters, and anything else that could clog or even damage the finer filters down inside the pipes. The reverse osmosis process the plant used to remove salt and other minerals from the water required high-pressure filtering, and what better pressure to use than a hundred feet of ocean?

Every twenty seconds the pipes drew water. When he'd been a little kid, his dad had brought him here once in a while. Dimitri had loved to get up above the cage and let himself be sucked against it over and over by the draw. You absolutely could not move when the draw was pulling you against the screen. Even Dad couldn't.

"Are you still there?" asked the dispatcher.

"I'm here."

"The rescue team is leaving now. They'll be there in a few minutes."

"Okay."

"Just stay calm."

"Okay."

Dimitri worked his way down the cage to the open access hatch he'd seen on the monitor. He went through it and paused, fighting off a fit of shivering.

Nothing between him and the pipes now.

He looked at the hatch, debating whether to close it. Yes, he should—otherwise critters would start drifting in and clogging up the filters. Maybe this precaution would win him some points to counter the chewing out he was going to get for coming in here.

He swallowed, remembering the time Dad had yelled at him for goofing around the screen cage without permission. He and Collin had gone to play in the draw. When they'd come back Dad had met them at the hatch, white-faced and silent, his green eyes glaring. He'd waited for them to get out of their dive gear and marched them into the condo, where he proceeded to chew them a new one in a rage-clipped voice.

"Never, *never* go out in open ocean without an adult and without getting my permission first!"

"But, Dad, we were each other's buddies—"

"I don't care if the whole polo team was out there! You don't go near the screen cage without an adult—namely me—supervising!"

Dimitri closed his eyes. There'd been no physical punishment, but the memory of Dad's fury had kept him from going near the screen cage again. He hadn't even asked Dad to bring him here to play. Now he was *inside* the cage, without even a buddy, trying to save Dad.

Boy, would he look stupid if Dad was somewhere else altogether. Boy, would he get grounded, probably till he was thirty.

He pulled the hatch shut behind him and took a slow, deliberate breath, then kicked off toward the pipes. He came in a good five meters below their tops, watching the water above them the whole while.

Small specks—anything littler than a centimeter—drifted in the water. Dimitri saw the bulk of the nearest intake pipe looming in his peripheral vision as he neared it. He felt forward with his hands, still watching the water above. Suddenly the specks all flew downward and the distant thrum of the filters vibrated through the water.

Dimitri winced, imagining he felt the draw even though he knew he was well below it. He scrabbled at the pipe, trying to find a handhold, while his hindbrain counted.

*One chimpanzee, two chimpanzee, three chimpanzee . . .*

After ten seconds the draw stopped. Dimitri gave a small sigh of relief.

"You all right?" asked the dispatcher.

"Yeah."

"I know this is scary."

Yeah. Shut up.

He found a runner rail on the outside of the pipe and clipped an anchor line from his harness to it, then glanced overhead, looking for the number on the pipe. Six. He needed to be one pipe over, and two rows down. Kicking off, he clipped to the next pipe and released the first clip.

The intakes sucked water again, and this time he forced himself to keep moving. He worked his way back to pipe twenty-seven, doubling his clips until the draw stopped. When he reached twenty-seven he clipped *all* of the harness's anchors to the two rails he could reach, and began to spider his way up the pipe.

Two meters from the top the pipe throbbed under him as the draw started again. Unprepared, he let out a small sound.

"You okay?" asked the dispatcher at once.

Dimitri closed his eyes. "Yeah."

"Why don't you drink some water? That might help."

"Um, okay. Maybe you could talk to me?"

"Sure. You know the team will be there in just a few more minutes. Nothing to worry about."

Dimitri lowered the volume until he could barely hear her in the background, and continued to the top of the pipe where the other grappling harness—or rather, the two frayed straps that were left of it—hung dangling. Seeing them made him start breathing fast again, and he muted his com output so the dispatcher wouldn't hear.

The draw stopped. Dimitri poked his head over the top of the pipe, aiming his lamps down inside.

Torn harness straps drifted from one of the interior runner rails. A dark shape lay against the next screen, ten meters down.

Dad. Not moving.

A lilt of inquiry in the dispatcher's voice caught Dimitri's attention. He pulled his head back from the pipe and took his com output off mute, then raised the input volume.

"Huh?"

"I said where was your dad the last time you saw him?"

"Uh—he went out on his maintenance rounds. They should check the intake pipes at the plant. There was something on the maintenance log."

The draw started, tugging at him hard, this close. He cringed against the pipe and worked his way down it a bit, hand over hand on the runner rail. His heart was thundering.

"Okay, they can check that. Don't worry. Just stay calm."

Dimitri swallowed. "Yeah. Thanks."

He muted the output again. When the draw stopped, he would have twenty seconds to get to the inside of the pipe and clip his harness to the rails. He unclipped all but two of his leads now, and noticed his hands were shaking.

He put a hand to the pony bottle to make sure it was still on his belt. The draw stopped and he worked his way up to the top edge of the pipe again. He reached one arm over and clipped the first harness anchor to the inner rail. He'd done two when something dark came at him from the side.

Turning his head brought his lamps to bear on the dagger-filled maw of a shark.

"Aahh!"

He yanked the pony bottle from his belt, grazing his hand on the clip, and shoved it with all his might into the shark's nose. The shark swerved away, into the darkness.

Dimitri turned, dangling against the pipe, his lamps sweeping wildly as he tried to see the shark. He glimpsed a dark shape not far off, turning, coming around.

Sobbing, he gripped the slippery sides of the pony bottle, ready to hit the shark again. It came toward him, wagging from side to side, sneering with all those horrible teeth.

The pipe against him thrummed to life. The shark disappeared, sucked



down into another pipe, straight through the screen over its top, which wasn't meant to resist anything as massive as a shark.

Or a man.

Dimitri grabbed at the rail as the leads he'd clipped to the inside of the pipe yanked at him. He clung against the rail with one hand and hugged the pony bottle to him with the other, then closed his eyes, gasping as he fought down the panic.

Stupid. He shouldn't have come out. He was just going to get himself killed along with Dad.

How the hell had that shark gotten in here?

Through the open access hatch. Now it was down in another pipe, and another screen had been breached. *That* was going to cost some money to fix.

Never mind. Not his problem. He had to get to Dad.

The draw stopped, and he unclenched his hand from the runner rail. Before he could think about it too much he swung himself over and into the pipe, through the torn screen, and started clipping more of his anchors to the inside rail. He paused to clip the pony bottle to his belt again, then with shaking hands anchored all his leads.

It actually hurt to unclip the last two from the outside of the pipe. He was going to get sucked down, he knew. The harness should keep him from being pulled down too far, but then, Dad's harness should have kept Dad from going into the pipe at all.

The dispatcher's voice was a drone in the back of his head as he worked his way downward, clinging to the rail. She sounded pretty excited, but Dimitri didn't have time to calm her down. He shut off the volume completely so he could concentrate.

Halfway to his dad the draw began. A strap whipped his arm and the suction pulled him from the rail before he could tighten his grip. He dangled in the harness, the straps digging into his back and shoulders, straining against the intense pressure of the intake as he stared at the top of the pipe above him.

It stopped after what seemed like a whole minute. Gasping, Dimitri regained the runner rails and struggled downward again until he reached the next screen, where his father lay unmoving.

Dimitri pulled his father onto his side. A glance at the tank gauge showed him that it loomed just over empty. He swapped in the pony bottle and made sure it was delivering, then shook his father by the shoulders.

"Dad!"

No response. Dimitri checked the vitals readout on the wrist display of his father's wetsuit. Pulse—slow but there. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't conscious either.

Draw.

The pull slammed him into his father, slammed them both into the screen. Dimitri cried out. His leg, which was against the screen, felt like it was going to get mashed right through it. His brain shut down except for the part that kept crazily counting chimpanzees.

When he got to eleven the draw stopped. There were only supposed to

be ten chimpanzees, but probably he wasn't thinking too straight. Maybe adrenaline made you count fast.

Sobbing, he took his dad's face between his hands. Dad's eyes were closed. Dimitri's hand brushed an unfamiliar shape at the back of the wetsuit.

A lump. A lump on dad's skull the size of an oyster.

Dimitri gave a moan, then scrambled to fasten Dad into the harness with him, using some of the anchor straps. It would put more strain on the rest of the anchors, but he couldn't think of what else to do.

He started up the runner rails with the five anchors he had left and his father dangling behind him. He was not quite halfway up when the draw started again.

Prepared this time, he managed to cling to the runner rails at first but the dead weight of his father dragging on him pried his fingers from the rails. The anchor straps snapped taut with a sharp jerk. Dimitri stared helplessly at the clip ends. The clips would hold, but even the heavy duty straps weren't meant to take the load of two people.

*Seven chimpanzee. Eight . . .*

His teeth were chattering and he clenched them to stop it. When the draw ended he scrambled up the rail as fast as he could, pulling the anchor lines up, clamping them, pull, clamp.

He'd stopped looking up and was surprised when he reached the top of the pipe. Beams of light were dancing in the water overhead. He started to laugh, then remembered he wasn't out yet.

He unclipped an anchor, reached over the edge to clip it to the outside, and the draw took him.

He tried to keep his arm over the edge but the draw was pulling at him, the edge of the pipe cutting into his arm, he couldn't hold it. He tried to shift and lost his grip.

Down into the pipe again, water pulling at Dad pulling at him pulling at the harness and he could feel it starting to give, then he swung against the side of the pipe, bashing his head.

*Okay, that's what happened.*

His ears were ringing and his head felt like it had been hit with a sledgehammer. He closed his eyes.

*Nine chimpanzee. Ten . .*

He floated, relieved. In a minute the draw would start up again. There was something he ought to be doing, but he couldn't quite remember what. He was just so tired. And anyway, he was drifting up. The harness was pulling him. Maybe they were going up to heaven.

Dimitri woke into silence. He didn't recognize where he was at first, but after a minute he started to remember and realized he was in the Pacific City med center.

He sat up. Something beeped. A pretty blonde medic came in the open doorway and smiled.

"Feeling better?"

"I guess."

Actually, now that he thought about it, he was aching all over. He rubbed at one shoulder. The medic checked the array on the wall by the bed, then nodded.

"You're doing fine. Gave us a slight scare there. You got a pretty good clock on the head."

"H-how's my dad?"

She smiled again, softly this time. "Very well, considering. He's right next door. Want to visit him?"

"Yeah."

She reached out to help him from the bed. He let her—it was easier than arguing. His head swam a little and he was glad for her supporting arm as they walked to the next room.

Dad lay unmoving in the darkened room. He hardly looked like he was breathing at all, but the readouts on the array beside him were flickering. The medic leaned over them for a closer look. All Dimitri could look at was Dad.

Why did he look smaller? Was it all the medical stuff around him? Or just the paleness of his skin?

The medic brushed against the bed and Dad's eyes flickered open. They fixed on Dimitri and a slight frown creased Dad's forehead.

*Oh, no. He doesn't remember me. He's got a—a concussion or something worse, and he'll never be the same.*

Dimitri swallowed and tried to smile. "H-hi, Dad."

His father blinked a couple of times. "I understand you saved my life."

Not knowing what to say, Dimitri gave a half shrug, half nod. "I guess."

"You came into the screen cage."

*Here it comes.*

Dimitri braced himself and nodded. His father stared flatly at him for an endless minute.

"What took you so long?"

Startled, Dimitri opened his mouth, but before he could say anything he was yanked into his dad's arms. It hurt his sore shoulders, but he didn't mind.

He didn't mind one bit. ○

## A MEETING OF MINDS

You follow your geodesic.

I follow mine.

The fact that we are

both "freely falling"

does not mean

that we agree.

A little locally

appropriate acceleration

is needed

and even, perhaps,

a change of inertial frame.

—Karin L. Frank

# BY FOOLS LIKE ME

Nancy Kress

**Nancy Kress will have three new books out next year: an SF novel from Tor, a collection of short stories from Golden Gryphon Press, and another short novel from Tachyon. In her latest story for us, she takes a chilling look at the fires the future could hold.**

**H**ope creeps quietly into my bedroom without knocking, peering around the corner of the rough doorjamb. I'm awake; sleep eludes me so easily now. I know from the awful smell that she has been to the beach.

"Come in, child, I'm not asleep."

"Grandma, where's Mama and Papa?"

"Aren't they in the field?" The rains are late this year and water for the crops must be carried in ancient buckets from the spring in the dell.

"Maybe. I didn't see them. Grandma, I found something."

"What, child?"

She gazes at me and bites her lip. I see that this mysterious find bothers her. Such a sensitive child, though sturdy and healthy enough, God knows how.

"I went to the beach," she confesses in a rush. "Don't tell Mama! I wanted to dig you some trunter roots because you like them so much, but my shovel went clunk on something hard and I . . . I dug it up."

"Hope," I reprimand, because the beach is full of dangerous bits of metal and plastic, washed up through the miles of dead algae on the dead water. And if a soot cloud blows in from the west, it will hit the beach first.

"I'm sorry," she says, clearly lying, "but, Grandma, it was a metal box and the lock was all rusted and there was something inside and I brought it here."

"The box?"

"No, that was too heavy. The . . . just wait!"

No one can recognize most of the bits of rusted metal and twisted plastic from before the Crash. Anything found in a broken metal box should be decayed beyond recognition. I call "Hope! Don't touch anything slimy—"

but she is already out of earshot, running from my tiny bedroom with its narrow cot, which is just blankets and pallet on a rope frame to keep me off the hard floor. It doesn't; the old ropes sag too much, just as the thick clay walls don't keep out the heat. But that's my fault. I close the window shutters only when I absolutely have to. Insects and heat are preferable to dark. But I have a door, made of precious and rotting wood, which is more than Hope or her parents have on their sleeping alcoves off the house's only other room. I expect to die in this room.

Hope returns, carrying a bubble of sleek white plastic that fills her bare arms. The bubble has no seams. No mold sticks to it, no sand. Carefully she lays the thing on my cot.

Despite myself, I say, "Bring me the big knife and be very careful, it's sharp."

She gets the knife, carrying it as gingerly as an offering for the altar. The plastic slits more readily than I expected. I peel it back, and we both gasp.

I am the oldest person on Island by two decades, and I have seen much. Not of the world my father told me about, from before the Crash, but in our world now. I have buried two husbands and five children, survived three great sandstorms and two years where the rains didn't come at all, planted and first-nursed a sacred tree, served six times at the altar. I have seen much, but I have never seen so much preserved sin in one place.

"What . . . Grandma . . . what is that?"

"A book, child. They're all books."

"Books?" Her voice holds titillated horror. "You mean . . . like they made before the Crash? Like they cut down *trees* to make?"

"Yes."

"Trees? Real *trees*?"

"Yes." I lift the top one from the white plastic bubble. Firm thick red cover, like . . . dear God, it's made from the skin of some animal. My gorge rises. Hope mustn't know that. The edges of the sin are gold. My father told me about books, but not that they could look like this. I open it.

"Oh!" Hope cried. "Oh, Grandma!"

The first slate—no, first *page*, the word floating up from some childhood conversation—is a picture of trees, but nothing like the pictures children draw on their slates. This picture shows dozens of richly colored trees, crowded together, each with *hundreds* of healthy, beautifully detailed green leaves. The trees shade a path bordered with glorious flowers. Along the path runs a child wearing far too many wraps, following a large white animal dressed in a wrap and hat and carrying a small metal machine. At the top of the picture, words float on golden clouds: *Alice in Wonderland*.

"Grandma! Look at the—Mama's coming!"

Before I can say anything, Hope grabs the book, shoves it into the white bubble, and thrusts the whole thing under my cot. I feel it slide under my bony ass, past the sag that is my body, and hit the wall. Hope is standing up by the time Gloria crowds into my tiny room.

"Hope, have you fed the chickens yet?"

"No, Mama, I—"

Gloria reaches out and slaps her daughter. "Can't I trust you to do anything?"

"Please, Gloria, it's my fault. I sent her to see if there's any more mint growing in the dell."

Gloria scowls. My daughter-in-law is perpetually angry, perpetually exhausted. Before my legs gave out, when I could still do a full day's work, I used to fight back. The Island is no more arid, the see-oh-too no higher, for Gloria than for anyone else. She has borne no more stillborn children than have other women, has endured no fewer soot clouds. But now that she and my son must feed my nearly useless body, I try not to anger her too much, not to be a burden. I weave all day. I twist rope, when there are enough vines to spare for rope. I pretend to be healthier than I am.

Gloria says, "We don't need mint, we need fed chickens. Go, Hope." She turns.

"Gloria—"

"What?" Her tone is unbearable. I wonder, for the thousandth time, why Bill married her, and for the thousandth time I answer my own question.

"Nothing," I say. I don't tell her about the sin under the bed. I could have, and ended it right there. But I do not.

God forgive me.

Gloria stands behind the altar, dressed in the tattered green robe we all wear during our year of service. I sit on a chair in front of the standing villagers; no one may miss services, no matter how old or sick or in need of help to hobble to the Grove. Bill half carried me here, afraid no doubt of being late and further angering his wife. It's hard to have so little respect for my son.

It is the brief time between the dying of the unholy wind that blows all day and the fall of night. Today the clouds are light gray, not too sooty, but not bearing rain, either.

The altar stands at the bottom of the dell, beside the spring that makes our village possible. A large flat slab of slate, it is supported by boulders painstakingly chiseled with the words of God. It took four generations to carve that tiny writing, and three generations of children have learned to read by copying the sacred texts onto their slates. I was among the first. The altar is shaded by the six trees of the Grove and from my uncomfortable seat, I can gaze up at their branches against the pale sky.

How beautiful they are! Ours are the tallest, straightest, healthiest trees of any village on Island. I planted and first-nursed one of them myself, the honor of my life. Even now I feel a thickness in my shriveled chest as I gaze up at the green leaves, each one wiped free of dust every day by those in service. Next year, Hope will be one of them. There is nothing on Earth lovelier than the shifting pattern of trees against the sky. Nothing.

Gloria raises her arms and intones, "'Then God said, 'I give you every plant and every tree on the whole Earth. They will be food for you.'"

"Amen," call out two or three people.

"Wail, oh pine tree," Gloria cries, "'for the cedar has fallen, the stately trees are ruined! Wail, oaks—'"

"Wail! Wail!"

I have never understood why people can't just worship in silence. This lot is sometimes as bad as a flock of starlings.

"—oaks of Bashan, the—"

Hope whispers, "Who's Bashan?"

Bill whispers back, "A person at the Crash."

"—dense forest has been cut down! And they were told—told!—not to harm the grass of Earth or any plant or tree."

*Revelation 9:4*, I think automatically, although I never did find out what the words or numbers mean.

"The vine is dried up!" Gloria cries, "the fig tree is withered! The pomegranate and the palm and the apple tree, all the trees of the field, are dried up! Surely the joy of mankind is withered away!"

"Withered! Oh, amen, withered!"

*Joel 1:12.*<sup>a</sup>

"Offer sacrifices and burn incense on the high places, under any spreading tree!"

Amy Martin, one of the wailers, comes forward with the first sacrifice, an unrecognizable piece of rusted metal dug up from the soil or washed up on the beach. She lays it on the altar. Beside me Hope leans forward, her mouth open and her eyes wide. I can read her young thoughts as easily as if they, too, are chiseled in stone: *That metal might have been part of a "car" that threw see-oh-two and soot into the air, might have been part of a "factory" that poisoned the air, might have even been part of a "saw" that cut down the forests!* Hope shudders, but I glance away from the intensity on her face. Sometimes she looks too much like Gloria.

Two more sacrifices are offered. Gloria takes an ember from the banked fire under the altar—the only fire allowed in the village—and touches it briefly to the sacrifices. "Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord's glory, for an everlasting sign which—"

I stop listening. Instead I watch the leaves move against the sky. What is "myrtle"—what did it look like, why was it such a desirable plant? The leaves blur. I have dozed off, but I realize this only when the whole Village shouts together, "We will never forget!" and services are over.

Bill carries me back through the quickening darkness without stars or moon. Without the longed-for rain. Without the candles I remember from my childhood on Island, or the dimly remembered (dreamed?) fireless lights from before that. There are no lights after dark on Island, nothing that might release soot into the air.

We will never forget.

It's just too bad that services are so boring.

*Alice in Wonderland.*

*Pride and Prejudice.*

*Birds of India and Asia.*

*Moby Dick.*

*Morning Light.*

*Jane Eyre.*

*The Sun Also Rises.*

I sit on my cot, slowly sounding out the strange words. Of course the sun rises—what else could it do? It's rising now outside my window, which lets in pale light, insects, and the everlasting hot wind.

"Can I see, Grandma?" Hope, naked in the doorway. I didn't hear the



door open. She could have been Gloria. And is it right for a child to see this much sin?

But already she's snuggled beside me, smelling of sweat and grime and young life. Even her slight body makes the room hotter. All at once a memory comes to me, a voice from early childhood: *Here, Anna, put ice on that bruise. Listen, that's a—*

What bruise? What was I to listen to? The memory is gone.

"M—m—m—oh—bee—Grandma, what's a 'moby'?"

"I don't know, child."

She picks up a different one. "J—j—aye—n . . . Jane! That's Miss Anderson's name! Is this book about her?"

"No. Another Jane, I think." I open *Moby Dick*. Tiny, dense writing, pages and pages of it, whole burned forests of it.

"Read the sin with the picture of trees!" She roots among the books until she finds *Alice in Wonderland* and opens it to that impossible vision of tens, maybe hundreds, of glorious trees. Hope studies the child blessed enough to walk that flower-bordered path.

"What's her name, Grandma?"

"Alice." I don't really know.

"Why is she wearing so many wraps? Isn't she *hot*? And how many days did her poor mother have to work to weave so many?"

I recognize Gloria's scolding tone. The pages of the book are crisp, bright and clear, as if the white plastic bubble had some magic to keep sin fresh. Turning the page, I begin to read aloud. "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank—"

"She has a *sister*," Hope breathes. Nearly no one does now; so few children are carried to term and born whole.

"—and tired of having nothing to do: once—"

"How could she have nothing to do? Why doesn't she carry water or weed crops or hunt trunter roots or—"

"Hope, are you going to let me read this to you or not?"

"Yes, Grandma. I'm sorry."

I shouldn't be reading to her at all. *Trees* were cut down to make this book; my father told me so. As a young man, not long after the Crash, he himself was in service as a book sacrificer, proudly. Unlike many of his generation, my father was a moral man.

"—or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversation in it, 'and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversation?' So she was considering—"

We read while the sun clears the horizon, a burning merciless ball, and our sweat drips onto the gold-edged page. Then Gloria and Bill stir in the next room and Hope is on the floor in a flash, shoving the books under my sagging cot, running out the door to feed the chickens and hunt for their rare, precious eggs.

The rains are very late this year. Every day Gloria, scowling, scans the sky. Every day at sunset she and Bill drag themselves home, bone-weary and smeared with dust, after carrying water from the spring to the crops.

The spring is in the dell, and water will not flow uphill. Gloria is also in service this year and must nurse one of the trees, wiping the poisonous dust from her share of the leaves, checking for dangerous insects. More work, more time. Some places on Earth, I was told once, have too much water, too many plants from the se-oh-too. I can't imagine it. Island has heard from no other place since I was a young woman and the last radio failed. Now a radio would be sin.

I sit at the loom, weaving. I'm even clumsier than usual, my fingers stiff and eyes stinging. From too much secret reading, or from a high see-oh-too day? Oh, let it be from the reading!

"Grandma," Hope says, coming in from tending the chickens. "My throat hurts." Her voice is small; she knows.

Dear God, not *now*, not when the rains are already so late . . . But I look out the window and yes, I can see it on the western horizon, thick and brown.

"Bring in the chickens, Hope. Quick!"

She runs back outside while I hobble to the heavy shutters and wrestle them closed. Hope brings in the first protesting chicken, dumps it in her sleeping alcove, and fastens the rope fence. She races back for the next chicken as Bill and Gloria run over the fields toward the house.

Not *now*, when everything is so dry . . .

They get the chickens in, the food covered, as much water inside as can be carried. At the last moment Bill swings closed the final shutter, and we're plunged into darkness and even greater heat. We huddle against the west wall. The dust storm hits.

Despite the shutters, the holy protection of wood, dust drifts through cracks, under the door, maybe even through chinks in the walls. The dust clogs our throats, noses, eyes. The wind rages: ooooooooooooooooooooo. Shrinking beside me, Hope gasps, "It's trying to get in!"

Gloria snaps, "Don't talk!" and slaps Hope. Gloria is right, of course; the soot carries poisons that Island can't name and doesn't remember. Only I remember my father saying, "Methane and bio-weapons . . ."

*Here, Anna, put ice on that bruise. Listen, that's a—*

A what? What was that memory?

Then Gloria, despite her slap, begins to talk. She has no choice; it's her service year and she must pray aloud. "Wail, oh pine tree, for the cedar has fallen, the stately trees are ruined! Wail, oaks of Bashan, the dense forest has been cut down!"

I want Gloria to recite a different scripture. I want, God forgive me, Gloria to shut up. Her anger burns worse than the dust, worse than the heat.

"The vine is dried up and the fig is withered; the pomegranate—"

I stop listening.

*Listen, that's a—*

Hope trembles beside me, a sweaty mass of fear.

The dust storm proves mercifully brief, but the see-oh-too cloud pulled behind it lasts for days. Everyone's breathing grows harsh. Gloria and Bill, carrying water, get fierce headaches. Gloria makes Hope stay inside, telling her to sit still. I see in Gloria's eyes the concern for her only living

child, a concern that Hope is too young to see. Hope sees only her mother's anger.

Left alone, Hope and I sin.

All the long day, while her parents work frantically to keep us alive, we sit by the light of a cracked shutter and follow Alice down the rabbit hole, through the pool of tears, inside the White Rabbit's house, to the Duchess's peppery kitchen. Hope stops asking questions, since I know none of the answers. What is pepper, a crocodile, a caucus race, marmalade? We just read steadily on, wishing there were more pictures, until the book is done and Alice has woken. We begin *Jane Eyre*: "'There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. . . .'"

*Birds of India and Asia* has gorgeous pictures, but the writing is so small and difficult that I can't read most of it. Nonetheless, this is the book I turn to when Hope is asleep. So many birds! And so many colors on wings and backs and breasts and rising from the tops of heads like fantastic feathered trees. I wish I knew if these birds were ever real, or if they are as imaginary as Alice, as the White Rabbit, as marmalade. I wish—

"Grandma!" Hope cries, suddenly awake. "It's raining outside!"

Joy, laughter, dancing. The whole village gathers at the altar under the trees. Bill carries me there, half running, and I smell his strong male sweat mingled with the sweet rain. Hope dances in her drenched wrap like some wild thing and chases after the other children.

Then Gloria strides into the Grove, grabs Hope, and throws her onto the altar. "You've sinned! My own daughter!"

Immediately everyone falls silent. The village, shocked, looks from Gloria to Hope, back to Gloria. Gloria's face is twisted with fury. From a fold of her wrap she pulls out *Alice in Wonderland*.

"This was in the chicken coop! This! A sin, trees *destroyed* . . . you had this in our very house!" Gloria's voice rises to a shriek.

Hope shrinks against the wide flat stone and she puts her hands over her face. Rain streams down on her, flattening her hair against her small skull. The book in Gloria's hand sheds droplets off its skin cover. Gloria tears out pages and throws them to the ground, where they go sodden and pulpy as maggots.

"Because of you, God might not have sent any rains at all this year! We're just lucky that in His infinite mercy—you risked—you—"

Gloria drops the mutilated book, pulls back her arm, and with all her force strikes Hope on the shoulder. Hope screams and draws into a ball, covering her head and neck. Gloria lashes out again, a sickening thud of hand on tender flesh. I cry, "Stop! No, Gloria, stop—Bill—let me go!"

He doesn't. No one else moves to help Hope, either. I can feel Bill's anguish, but he chokes out, "It's right, Mama." And then, invoking the most sacred scripture of all, he whispers, "We will never forget."

I cry out again, but nothing can keep Hope from justice, not even when I scream that it is my fault, my book, my sin. They know I couldn't have found this pre-Crash sin alone. They know that, but no one except me knows when Gloria passes beyond beating Hope for justice, for Godly ret-

tribution, into beating her from Gloria's own fury, her withered fig tree, her sin. No one sees but me. And I, an old woman, can do nothing.

Hope lies on her cot, moaning. I crouch beside her in her alcove, its small window unshuttered to the rain. Bill bound her broken arm with the unfinished cloth off my loom, then went into the storm in search of his wife.

"Hope . . . dear heart . . ."

She moans again.

If I could, I would kill Gloria with my own hands.

A sudden lone crack of lightning brightens the alcove. Already the skin on Hope's wet arms and swollen face has started to darken. One eye swells.

*Here, Anna, put ice on that bruise. Listen, that's a—*

"Grandma . . ."

"Don't talk, Hope."

"Water," Hope gasps and I hold the glass for her. Another flash of lightning and for a moment Gloria stands framed in the window. We stare at each other. With a kind of horror I feel my lips slide back, baring my teeth. Gloria sees, and cold slides down my spine.

Then the lightning is gone, and I lay my hand on Hope's battered body.

The rain lasts no more than a few hours. It's replaced by day after day of black clouds that thunder and roil but shed no water. Day after day. Gloria and Bill let half the field die in their attempt to save the other half. The rest of the village does much the same.

Hope heals quickly; the young are resilient. I sit beside her, weaving, until she can work again. Her bruises turn all the colors of the angry earth: black and dun and dead-algae green. Gloria never looks at or speaks to her daughter. My son smiles weakly at us all, and brings Hope her meal, and follows Gloria out the door to the fields.

"Grandma, we sinned."

Did we? I don't know any more. To cut down *trees* in order to make a book . . . my gorge rises at just the thought. Yes, that's wrong, as wrong as anything could ever be. Trees are the life of the Earth, are God's gift to us. Even my father's generation, still so selfish and sinful, said so. Trees absorb the see-oh-too, clean the air, hold the soil, cool the world. Yes.

But, against that, the look of rapture on Hope's face as Alice chased the White Rabbit, the pictures of *Birds of India and Asia*, Jane Eyre battling Mrs. Reed . . . Hope and I destroyed nothing ourselves. Is it so wrong, then, to enjoy another's sin?

"We sinned," Hope repeats, mourning, and it is her tone that hardens my heart. "No, child. We didn't."

"We didn't?" Her eyes, one still swollen, grow wide.

"We didn't make the books. They already *were*. We just read them. Reading isn't sinful."

"Nooooo," she says reluctantly. "Not reading the altar scriptures. But Alice is—"

Gloria enters the house. She says to me, "Services tonight."

I say, "I'm not going."

Gloria stops dead halfway to the wash bucket, her field hat suspended in her hand. For the briefest moment I see something like panic on her face, before it vanishes into her usual anger. "Not going? To services?"

"No."

Hope, frightened, looks from her mother to me. Bill comes in.

Gloria snaps, with distinct emphasis, "*Your* mother says she's not going to services tonight."

Bill says, "Mama?"

"No," I say, and watch his face go from puzzlement to the dread of a weak man who will do anything to avoid argument. I hobble to my alcove and close the door. Later, from my window, I watch them leave for the Grove, Hope holding her father's hand.

Gloria must have given him silent permission to do that.

My son.

Painfully I lower myself to the floor, reach under my cot, and pull out the white plastic bubble. For a while I gaze at the pictures of the gorgeous birds of India and Asia. Then I read *Jane Eyre*. When my family returns at dusk, I keep reading as long as the light holds, not bothering to hide any of the books, knowing that no one will come in.

One heavy afternoon, when the clouds steadily darken and I can no longer see enough to make out words, a huge bolt of lightning shrieks through the sky—*crack!* For a long moment my head vibrates. Then silence, followed by a shout: "Fire!"

I haul myself to my knees and grasp the bottom of the window. The lightning hit one of the trees in the Grove. As I watch, numb, the fire leaps on the ceaseless wind to a second tree.

People scream and run, throwing buckets of muddy water from the spring. I can see that it will do no good—too much dry timber, too much wind. A third tree catches, a fourth, and then the grass too is on fire. Smoke and ash rise into the sky.

I sink back onto my cot. I planted one of those trees, nursed it as I'd once nursed Bill. But there is nothing I can do. Nothing.

By the light of the terrible flames I pick up *Jane Eyre* and, desperately, I read.

And then Hope bursts in, smeared with ash, sweat and tears on her face.

"Hope—no! Don't!"

"Give it to me!"

"No!"

We struggle, but she is stronger. Hope yanks *Jane Eyre* out of my hands and hurls it to the floor. She drops on top of it and crawls under my cot. Frantically I try to press down the sagging ropes so that she can't get past them, but I don't weigh enough. Hope backs out with the other books in their plastic bubble. She scrambles to her feet.

"We did this! You and me! Our sin made God burn the trees!"

"No! Hope—"

"Yes! We did this, just like the people before the Crash!"

*We will never forget.*

I reach for her, for the books, for everything I've lost or am about to lose. But Hope is already gone. From my window I see her silhouetted against the flames, running toward the grass. The village beats the grass with water-soaked cloths. I let go of the sill and fall back onto the cot before I can see Hope throw the books onto the fire.

Gloria beats Hope again, harder and longer this time. She and Bill might have put me out of the house, except that I have no place to go. So they settle for keeping me away from Hope, so that I cannot lead her further into sin.

Bill speaks to me only once about what happened. Bringing me my meal—meager, so meager—he averts his eyes from my face and says haltingly, "Mama . . . I . . ."

"Don't," I say.

"I have to . . . you . . . Gloria . . ." All at once he finds words. "A little bit of sin is just as bad as a big sin. That's what *you* taught me. What all those people thought before the Crash—that their cars and machines and books each only destroyed a little air so it didn't matter. And look what happened! The Crash was—"

"Do you really think you're telling me something I don't know? Telling *me*?"

Bill turns away. But as he closes the door behind him, he mumbles over his shoulder, "A little bit of sin is as bad as a big sin."

I sit in my room, alone.

Bill is not right. Nor is Gloria, who told him what to say. Nor is Hope, who is, after all, a child, with a child's uncompromising, black-and-white faith. They are all wrong, but I can't find the arguments to tell them so. I'm too ignorant. The arguments must exist, they *must*—but I can't find them. And my family wouldn't listen anyway.

*Listen, Anna, that's a—*

A nightingale.

The whole memory flashes like lightning in my head: my father, bending over me in a walled garden, laughing, trying to distract me from some childish fall. *Here, Anna, put ice on that bruise. Listen, that's a nightingale!* A cube of frozen water pulled with strong fingers from his amber drink. Flowers everywhere, flowers of scarcely believable colors, crimson and gold and blue and emerald. And a burst of glorious unseen music, high and sweet. A bird, maybe one from *Birds of India and Asia*.

But I don't know, can't remember, what a nightingale looks like. And now I never will. ○

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**Danger and slavery await a teenage girl if she can't  
outwit the Boogie man who haunts . . .**

# **THE GOOD SHIP LOLLYPOP**

**R. Garcia y Robertson**

## **Boogie Man**

**S**hirlee first saw the Boogie man when she was seven. Mom was out cold, so Shirlee disabled the apartment alarm, then unlocked the kitchen disposal port. Mom's apartment had been a rec-room on a dorm deck, and the disposal easily accommodated a skillful child.

Crawling through the tubes, Shirlee emerged in what had been a cafeteria, when the Monrovia was a colony ship in deep space. Kids called it the Hall of Tables. Bare, chairless tables dominated the empty space, all bolted to one wall, because spin gravity had turned the ancient mess deck into a bulkhead.

She counted doors in the floor, until she came to Jill's, then thumbed the lock. Folks inside laughed to see her descend the ladder.

"For Elviz' sake, who's this?"

"Look, a curly blond Munchkin."

"Jill, your friend's here."

"Which friend?"

"Shirlee."

Lomax leaped on her, licking her ear.

Jill was eight, and lived in what had been a bosun's suite with her extended family, and a huge warm wolf-dog named Lomax. After a long fun play lasting past lights-out, Jill and Lomax walked her back to the disposal.

As Shirlee left, Jill's mother gave her a pair of little blue pep pills. "These are for Mom. So don't swallow them."

"Of course." Adults had such weird notions.

She gave Jill's mother a good-bye hug, keeping a careful hold on the pills.

Lights had dimmed down to nighttime levels, but Shirlee could still see. At the entrance to the Hall of Tables, Lomax growled.

Jill stuck her head into the hall. "Nothing there."



Shirlee looked for herself, seeing only the bare hall.

"He smells something," Jill decided.

Something bad, though neither said so. Whispering a prayer to Saint Michael, Shirlee slowly entered the hall, holding Jill's hand, with Lomax in the lead.

Past the rows of sideways tables was the serving area, and disposal, opening into the wall instead of the floor. Everything seemed normal, just tilted on its side.

Saying good-bye, Shirlee crawled into the tube, headed home. Before she got to the first turn, she heard Lomax bark.

Glancing back, she saw a black shadow fall over the open door. Shirlee froze in fear. Barely able to see the Boogie man, she could tell he was big, scary, and clearly a man, not a chimp or SuperCat. She begged Saint Michael to make it go away.

Luckily the Boogie man was far too big and frightening to fit in the disposal tube. After looking at her long and hard, he went on, headed the way Jill had gone.

Shirlee scrambled back to her apartment, emerging in the kitchen. Mom was still flat out on the float-a-bed.

Putting the pills on the bed table, Shirlee punched into the Net, calling for Jill. She found her at home, asking, "R U OK?"

"SURE Y?"

"I SAW THE BOOGIE MAN."

"U DID?"

"SWEAR 2 GLADYZ. N THE HALL OF TABLES."

"2 SCARY."

"U BET."

Mom got up, pushing aside damp hair, then looked groggily about. Her face was pale, and her skin sagged. Seeing the pills, Mom rolled bloodshot eyes. "You have got to stop sneaking off to Jill's on your own."

Shirlee nodded dutifully, and got out a carton of water. Mom popped a pill, broke the seal on the water carton, and drank. Then she plugged herself into the Net, and went back to work.

For once Mom was right. Shirlee never went visiting again without calling first. Jill would let Lomax out, and the huge furry, Dire wolf-dog cross would meet Shirlee in the Hall of Tables. Adults all claimed the Boogie man did not exist. But Shirlee was not fooled, nor was Lomax.

Shirlee did not see the Boogie man again until she was a teenager, but he was still out there.

Two years later, Jill's cousin Didi disappeared while picking strawberries. Net searches turned up nothing but the broken ID band that had been around her ankle. Alongside two spilled baskets of strawberries.

By then, Shirlee and Jill were big enough for field work. Shirlee enjoyed spending days above ground, in the habitat's broad agricultural strip, bathed in bright mirror-enhanced sunlight, eating cherries and berries whenever she liked.

But when the mirrors tilted toward night, throwing shadows over the fields, she remembered Didi, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

"Scared of the dark?" asked Jill.

Shirlee shuddered. "You did not see him."

"You did not lose a cousin," Jill reminded her.

When it got too dark to work, Jill whistled up Lomax, and the wolf-dog saw them home.

Shirlee celebrated turning thirteen by inviting Jill, Carol, and Tina to a private party in an empty dorm room. Slipping off their ID anklets, and blanking the security cams, they split up one of Mom's Z-pills.

Saying a prayer to Elviz, who had been an official narcotics agent, they solemnly swallowed their little bits of Z.

Never having taken any Z, not even a quarter pill, Shirlee was astonished. Walls moved back, as the little room expanded and dissolved, letting in the cosmos. She felt the living strawberry fields above, and the sunlight shining off the habitat's silver mirrors.

Finding the bare abandoned room far too confining, the girls blanked the corridor cams, then went giggling up to the surface, to run free through the fields, whooping and waving their hands.

Shirlee whirled around among the young plants, lit by the silver shining mirrors. She felt free and in the open, like when she was little. Not watched, not IDed. Unconfined and unafraid. Light streamed down from Niger A, the system's yellow sun, warming her skin. All that separated her from the cosmos was a transparent radiation barrier, holding in a thin layer of air.

For the first time since Didi disappeared, Shirlee stood in the strawberry fields, thrilling to the sunset. Fearlessly enjoying the moment, as the mirrors tilted in space, seeming to suck up the light. One by one, the stars came out around her.

Some of the girls knew their names. Carol pointed to a yellowish star. "That's Betelgeuse."

"And the big blue one is Rigel."

"That red one is Antares."

"No, it's Niger B."

"How do you know?"

"My dad is there." When she was little, Shirlee thought her father was a Feele star, because she only saw him on 3V. Now she knew better.

"Can you see Earth?"

"Don't be silly." At this distance they might as well try to see Graceland. Nor could they see the great gas giant the habitat orbited, since it was upsun from them. Monrovia seemed to hang alone among the stars.

"Time to go," Carol declared. Jill agreed, and Shirlee felt suddenly chilled. Her quarter-Z was wearing off.

Heading back toward the tunnels, her high faded. She no longer felt free and unafraid. Or unwatched.

Tina felt it too, silently taking her hand. This was how Didi disappeared.

Carol whispered, "We are being followed."

"What do you mean?" Jill demanded.

Carol shushed her. "Keep walking. Don't look."

Tina squeezed her hand, and Shirlee squeezed back, at the same time glancing over her shoulder into the darkness. Ignoring Carol's warning.

For the second time in her life, Shirlee saw the Boogie man, a black shape outlined in starlight, like a ninja in a night suit. He easily gained on them, growing larger.

Shirlee shrieked and ran, dragging Tina after her. Jill swore aloud, then joined them, with Carol close behind.

Jill got to the tunnel entrance first, and threw it open.

Looking back, Shirlee saw no sign of the Boogie man. Not necessarily good. There were many entrances, so he could be somewhere below. Waiting.

"What should we do?" hissed Jill.

Carol kept her head, saying tersely, "We need to go down and get our IDs."

"What if he's waiting down there?" Jill protested.

"What if he's sneaking up on us here?" Carol shot back.

Blanking the security cams and shedding their IDs no longer seemed so neat.

Shirlee spoke slowly and firmly. "We must go down together."

"What?"

"Why?"

"We cannot stay here. So we must go together," Shirlee insisted, wishing to heaven they had brought Lomax. Whatever made her think that they had outgrown the wolf-dog?

Saying a prayer to Saint Michael, they descended into the tunnels. Shirlee held tight to Tina, knowing that the dim night-lights were deceptive. They had blocked the cams, so no one could see them, except for the Boogie man.

Jill went first, being the oldest, if not the most enthusiastic. Threading through the corridors, they approached the room where they left their IDs. Its door stood invitingly open.

That scared Shirlee, since she had shut it. Or thought she had. "What should we do?"

Jill hissed back, "Did you shut the door?"

Shirlee nodded, "Think so."

Tina shrugged. "Not me."

"So what's that mean?" Jill hissed.

"Who knows?"

Jill sighed. "Stand back."

Being oldest, Jill must go in. Privilege had its perils. Jill stepped warily inside.

Shirlee held her breath, gripping Tina's hand even tighter.

She heard a horrible scream from inside the room, followed by even scarier silence.

No one leaped to save Jill. Shirlee ran, hauling Tina with her. Straight for home, to wake Mom and call the cops.

She got no farther than the Hall of Tables. There she slowed, expecting trouble, her head set on SWIVEL.

Here was where she first saw the Boogie man, back when she was little. She stepped gingerly into the abandoned cafeteria.

Gloved hands grabbed her from behind.

She screamed in terror. Tina twisted free, and was gone.

Before she could scream again, a man's hand covered her mouth. Shirlee could not speak, breathe, or move her arms.

Someone said, "Knock her out!"

What? Why? Something sharp hit her in the hip, and she collapsed into blackness.

Shirlee woke up under arrest. Nice robo-nurses explained that she was in a locked ward, facing multiple criminal counts. "Your friends are also safely in custody."

"What about the Boogie man?"

None of the nurses knew what she meant, telling her to relax and take her tranqs. "You are in enough trouble already."

Her newly appointed auto-lawyer agreed. Yesterday she would have gone to Children's Court, but now she would be tried as a teen. "Charges include electronic mischief, minor without ID, testing positive for Z, and evading arrest."

"What about the Boogie man?"

"Boogie man?"

"He was chasing us."

"That was a drug reaction."

"Tell it to Didi."

"Didi who?" asked the auto-lawyer.

Talking sense to a program was pointless. What could a legal algorithm know about being high? Elvиз personally tested every possible pill. Only the King really cared.

Mom was horribly upset, though she did not know the half of it. "Where in heavens did you get the Z?"

Shirlee rolled her eyes. What was she supposed to say, with her lawyer on-line? The program would probably turn Mom in. "The Boogie man left it for us."

"What?"

"To make us silly." And stupid.

"That's absurd."

Her Boogie man defense got a stiff reprimand from the judge as well. Blocking the corridor cams set off an alarm. Cops came looking, and caught them. There were no other suspects.

Nor did anyone believe this was Shirlee's first drugged frenzy, not even Mom.

So she went to JuVee for the first time, on a ninety-day sentence. At least her friends were all there.

These first three months in JuVee were a flat out education. Instructional 3V was beamed straight into her cell, starting at seven AM. Shirlee was in class before she was out of bed. All the girls were older than her. Any curiosity she had about paid sex, hard drugs, illicit love, and kiddie porn were answered before she could ask. Popular girls faced all those charges.

Happily, she gained some status from being convicted. Girls still presumed innocent, got it the worst.

Not that they were treated too badly, aside from being force-fed organ-

ic food, and assaulted with pre-dawn instruction. They were not beaten, except by each other. And she felt totally safe from the Boogie man.

She even got to see boys, in mixed drug counseling. Ex-addicts, petty thieves, and sex offenders happily felt her up when the counselors weren't looking. Shirlee got useful lessons in sleight of hand and camera angles.

This ardent interest was flattering, but the boys she liked best were least likely to grab her.

As her release date neared, she got bolder. On her final day of counseling, Shirlee brushed up against the boy she liked most, a repeat offender named Ivan. Terminally cute, he was older than her, with a sly smile, and warm, sure hands.

Shirlee got her first real kiss, and the brief feel of a boy's fingers in her pants, before adults pried them apart. Too bad he was in until eighteen.

As soon as she got out of JuVee, Shirlee made herself a peanut butter, banana, and bacon sandwich, fried in butter, to take away the awful taste of soy. She washed it down with a king-size vanilla shake.

Mom looked worse than Shirlee remembered, tearfully enrolling them both in rehab. Shirlee went for Mom's sake, finding it totally boring, being broken of a habit she had barely acquired. Drug classes just made her miss the boy who'd so deftly molested her. He would not be free for three more years.

Mom held out for a year and a half, dutifully keeping her daughter "clean." Then she finally crumpled under the burden of sobriety, relapsing with a vengeance. Despite Shirlee's best efforts, her Mom died less than a year after relapsing.

Devastated by her loss, Shirlee forgot to destroy Mom's stash. When she returned from the emergency room, she was promptly re-arrested.

Dad was somewhere in the B-system, and she had no other family, so Shirlee expected to end up back in JuVee. But it seemed way harsh to add another conviction. For Priscilla's sake, she was only fifteen, and already a re-offender. All for a quarter tab of Z.

Jill's family bid her good-bye. As the homeless, two-strike daughter of an OD, Shirlee would be in until eighteen. They kissed her, saying, "Good-bye, curly."

"Be good."

"An' keep the King with you."

All she could say was, "Kiss Lomax for me."

Jill wiped her eyes, swearing, "I will."

Another sort of kiss awaited inside. Happily, she was in for a drug offense, which meant more "peer counseling." Shirlee was delighted to find that Ivan was now a trustee. "Teens Teaching Teens" helped her immensely in dealing with Mom's death, giving Shirlee a purpose, a boyfriend, and an astounding new feeling of worth.

As Ivan's prize student, she learned the fine art of evading surveillance. Like how to silence a mike, or sidetrack a camera so it showed only an empty room. If you could make out in JuVee, you could make out anywhere.

Asked why he was in until eighteen, Ivan would only say, "Drugs, of course, and debauching little girls."

She grinned back. "Sounds totally sick."

Between bouts of sex education, Ivan boasted about his boyhood on Ashanti, claiming, "B-system's the best."

Not what Shirlee had heard. "No way."

"There's no law, not like this at least."

She mouthed a kiss. "This is not so bad."

Ivan laughed. "B-system beats this with a steel bat."

"So you say."

"Ashanti has Thals, Greenies, SuperCats, and floating cities. . . ."

"Is that good?"

"Better than picking strawberries." And safer.

Conditions of confinement kept Ivan from ever getting her bra off. Most of their dates were on camera, where she learned to keep a poker face, reciting the anti-drug mantra, while her peer tutor brought her to a concealed orgasm.

At eighteen, Ivan was released and deported to the B-system. Seeing Ivan set free was her second worst day in JuVee.

Even more alone, she moped about for months, missing Ivan, and remembering how Niger B had hung over the dark fields. Now her love circled that gleaming red star, while she stayed locked in Heartbreak Hotel.

Finally her gloom was broken by a happy, "Hey, druggie! How ya doin'?"

Carol stood casually among some new arrivals. Grabbing her friend, Shirlee asked, "What are you doing here?"

Carol smirked. "Two to eighteen."

"Whatever for?"

"Nothin' you wouldn't do."

That was for sure. Tall, red-haired Carol was far more cautious than Shirlee, deftly switching the subject. "Where's your too cute boyfriend?"

"Back in the B-system."

Carol ran a hand through Shirlee's prison-cut blond curls. "That's a real crime."

New girls gave them room, looking fearful and envious. Two repeat offenders, hugging and kissing before the cams, while openly mocking the law.

Carol came on like a blast of cherry-flavored oxygen, insisting they both volunteer for work release. Which was a total misnomer. They were not released at all, but taken through the de-spin system, to labor in v-suits on the habitat docks, loading goods and produce onto robo-cargo carriers. Cyborgs did the heavy moving, but small tasks in zero-g were more cheaply done with prison labor.

Shirlee liked seeing the cargo carriers depart, headed outsystem, or downsun toward Freetown. Long cylindrical gravity drives, pushing huge colored cargo spheres, made them look like flying lollipops.

Carol smiled at her enthusiasm, saying, "This is why I am in JuVee."

"To get an unpaid job at the docks?"

"Because I was caught with contraband."

"Contraband? How'd that happen?"

Carol turned her back to the cams, mouthing the word, "Secret."

During the next rest period, Carol dragged her into a corner, far from the nearest mike. With their helmets tipped back, Carol leaned over, saying, "Let me lick your ear."

Shirlee nodded at the cams. "They'll think we're necking."

"Good." Leaning closer, Carol whispered, "Not all this stuff gets on the right ship."

Shirlee's drug tutoring kicked in, pretending to do one thing while whispering another. "What do you mean?"

"Stuff gets rerouted."

"What stuff?"

"Expensive stuff. Drugs, high-tech trinkets, even people."

"People?"

"Sure. Illegals from the B-system. Or folks who just aim to disappear."

Ivan had been from B-system, and totally illegal.

"Some stuff ended up with me," Carol explained. "So I ended up here."

Carol let go of her and laughed. Shirlee pushed her friend away, then they sealed helmets and went back to work.

It did not stop there. When they were alone, between supper and lights out, Carol lay down beside her pretending to watch 3V. What started out like seduction ended up being a business proposition. Cautious Carol had not just happened to land in JuVee. All this was carefully planned. Carol had a memorized list of shipments to be switched, and wanted her help.

"Why?"

"Because I want out of here." Carol stared straight into the 3V docudrama about the founding of Freetown. "Not just out of JuVee. I want to go somewhere. Liberia. The B-system, I don't much care."

"I mean why me?"

Carol nudged her. "I need you."

And not in the normal way. Taking her hand, Carol told her, "The Boogie man got Tina."

Shirlee kept her face set, staring into the 3V, watching history reenacted, saying a silent prayer for Tina.

"Two months ago, just like Didi. All he left was her ID."

Carol squeezed her hand hard. "Someone has to help me switch the loads."

Trying not to cry, Shirlee nodded. She would do it. Not because it was smart, or safe, or because she stood to make a lot—but because Carol was all she had left.

Carol had it totally planned out, showing her how to reprogram the robots, sending cargo shooting off in new directions. Heavy lifters meant for Freetown sailed off to the B-system, replaced by their weight in illegal pharmaceuticals. Both recipients would presumably be pleased.

Such trades were completely illegal, but that hardly bothered Shirlee, being already in jail. After what happened to Tina, she was not sure she wanted out.

Carol herself could not wait to go. When the pre-programmed switches were complete, Carol was leaving in a special shipment, an entire cargo ship diverted to the B-system. Shirlee asked, "Won't this give it all away?"

"My leaving will give it away," Carol reminded her. "This provides the biggest payoff."

"What about the Navy?"

"Java is off chasing slavers." That was the nearest naval vessel, a J-class corvette assigned to the system.



Carol reached out, stroking her hair. "If you don't like hijacking, just call in sick. I can do this alone."

"No way." Shirlee shook her head, grimly determined to see Carol safely away.

Her friend sighed. "Wish I could take you too."

There was only room for one in the container set aside for Carol. Too bad. Dad, Ivan, and now Carol would all be in the B-system, while she was left behind.

Careful Carol included her in everything. Together they disabled the security cams, switching Carol's container for a load of freeze-dried produce meant for the Leading Trojans.

Unsure what to say when Carol disappeared, Shirlee knew that without camera evidence the worst they could do was put her in lock-down, since she was already in until eighteen. Going through the de-spin system together, they suited up in zero-g. Cameras were showing another shift, recorded days ago.

Shirlee went to check out the container, while Carol made sure security systems would send it through. There was enough food and air in the container to keep Carol going until it was time to emerge and hijack the ship.

Happy to see everything secure, Shirlee went to get Carol.

All she found was Carol's broken ID anklet, floating lazily in zero-g.

Shirlee froze, heartsick and terrified. Until that instant, she thought the Boogie man could never get her here.

What a fool! First Didi, then Tina, now Carol. She was sure to be next.

With the cams gone, she had no hope of getting through the de-spin system. Fighting tears, Shirlee did a zero-g flip, and swarmed back toward the cargo port, kicking off bulkheads to speed herself along.

Carol's container was open and waiting, already aboard the smart-loader. Opening her suit at the ankle, Shirlee tore off her ID band, letting it float free. That sent out a broadband alarm, but she was not waiting to see who came for her.

Climbing into the cramped container, she told the smart-loader to stow her away, and seal the ship. Then to lock down and forget any of this ever happened. Nothing would show that she was inside.

Cealed in the sealed ship, she shut down her suit, so no stray ergs would betray her. Lying curled in darkness, like a baby in a padded womb, she cried for Carol. Her sobs smothered the slight tremor of separation, as robo-container ship CSR15379 departed Monrovia dock, heading for the Leading Trojans at 2-gs.

Acceleration pressed her deep into the padding, and Shirlee knew she was on her way. More alone than ever.

### Stowaway

When she had cried herself out, Shirlee lay in the cramped darkness, feeling the firm tug of acceleration. She could lie here, safe and secure, as long as she wished. At 2-gs, she would reach the Leading Trojans in a few

days. There CSR15379 would be unloaded, and who knows what would happen. Did they have JuVee in the Trojans? Probably.

She sorely missed Carol's cunning flirtatious mayhem. With Carol leading, any catastrophe was her friend's fault. Now she had literally put herself in Carol's place.

And Carol had not been headed for the Trojans. Carol wanted to go to the B-system. Why not? Dad was there. And Ivan.

Taking the ship to the B-system was hijacking. Another felony, to go with stowing away, electronic fraud, smuggling, and grand larceny, plus her previous convictions. By now her life was hopelessly illegal.

What would the King do? Elviz was a federal officer, who had seen both sides of the badge, and felt the law worked best in his own hands. Elviz would say, "What's really keeping you in this box is fear of the Boogie man."

Too true. He might have gotten aboard the ship. He could be right outside, waiting for her.

But if the Boogie man was aboard, would he give her a free ride to the Trojans?

"Hell no, girl." Elviz made his own luck. "Boogie man's got days to find you, and break into that container."

Better to face fate head on. Fighting fear and gravity, Shirlee pushed herself up and unsealed the container. Then she cautiously lifted the lid.

No Boogie man, just stacks of silent containers, identical to hers. So far so good.

CSR15379 had no crew, but it did have a command deck, several levels below. Carefully, Shirlee climbed down the stacked containers. At 2-gs, it felt like she was carrying someone piggyback. She stopped at the interior command lock, her heart beating hard, afraid what she might find.

Sealing her helmet, she purged the lock, just in case. Putting it through a full cycle, from vacuum to ship normal, would kill any air breather inside.

When the pressure reequalized, she entered the lock. No dead Boogie man. Darn.

Searching the lock for protection, she found an emergency kit, with a lethal looking flare gun. Not a real blaster, but it would have to do.

Shirlee dilated the inner door.

Relief surged through her, seeing an empty command cabin, with its paired acceleration couches and simple control console. She had a ship.

Quickly, she sat down at the controls and evacuated the cabin. Now no one could enter without a v-suit, and tons of pressure held the inner lock closed.

For the first time since she'd seen Carol's broken ID band, Shirlee felt tolerably safe. Surrounded by nothingness.

Setting aside the flare gun, she checked the security cams, running them back to before she got aboard, when the Boogie man was outside grabbing Carol. Again nothing.

By now she knew camera scans were near to useless, having rigged them repeatedly. Still, she felt safe enough to raise cabin pressure, while keeping the locks evacuated. No one could enter without pressuring an air-lock, or cutting a hole in the cabin. She was bound to hear that.

Secure for the moment, Shirlee unsuited and flipped on the screens, taking a look at local space. Great brown-banded Mali, Monrovia's gas giant primary, covered half the screens. Monrovia hung nearby, with stars reflecting off her huge tilted mirrors. Liberia and Freetown were lost in the glow of Niger A. Niger B was smaller, and redder, but distinct as a beacon.

She was meant to be in the B-system. And if it took one more crime to get her there, so be it. Elviz would understand.

Shirlee began reprogramming the command console, seizing total control of the ship. Complete with her own whimsical access codes.

Monrovia control immediately objected:

CSR15379 return to autopilot

She did not answer.

CSR15379 return to autopilot, and submit a full status profile. . . .

Profile yourself. They would not even say please. She set the autopilot for a 1-g boost to Ashanti, relaxing into the couch as her weight returned to normal. B-system, here we come.

Monrovia control really hated that, but she did not dignify their shrill demands with a response.

There was nothing they could do. Carol had planned her escape perfectly. All the crewed ships were either far downsun, or on the other side of the system. Nor could they run her down with a regular robo-freighter. Too bad Carol could not see the resulting havoc.

"Nice goin', girlfriend."

Determined not to waste Carol's last gift, Shirlee scrolled through the ship's manifest, looking for something to use against the Boogie man—if he was aboard.

Damn! No convenient stash of small arms and battle armor. Her hijacked cargo was relentlessly peaceful, mostly food, medicine, and vacuum equipment. Plus some commercial explosives, and huge ice-mining lasers that would not fit on her hip. Useful stuff in the Leading Trojans, but small help to her.

She settled on a hand-sized laser cutter listed in the control deck repair kit. At close range it could slice any Boogie man in half.

Armed with the repair laser, she suited up, purged the cargo area, and diligently searched the ship. No Boogie man, just stacks and stacks of sealed containers.

Short of opening every container, Shirlee had done all she could. She retreated to the control deck, with its recycler, auto-galley, and twin couches, where she could sit back, setting the 3V for sense-surround.

Suddenly she was on a tropical isle, or the Pleistocene savanna of Glory. Or better yet, window shopping in a Freetown mall. Shirlee could even have made purchases, if she were not a convict felon fleeing the system.

Most exciting were views of the B-system, coming from navigation beacons, or human settlements on the outer planets. Greenies might have

magical floating cities on Ashanti, but they were utterly uninterested in virtual entertainment. Greenies used 3V for communication, not to replace reality.

Humans, however, were shameless. Shirlee sat through incredible come-ons from B-system sirens, who stepped straight out of the 3V to shed their scanty costumes on the command deck. Totally wasted on her, but even more educational than JuVee. Pleasure palaces in far off places promised to satisfy her every desire, no matter how lurid. Or far-fetched.

Scary sick, and not in a good way. She preferred the standard commercial pitches, from habitants in search of A-system retirees or high-tech smugglers trying to unload their goods—the cosmic shopping channel that she and Carol had fed.

All the time she kept looking for Ivan, or Dad, hoping to see one of them shilling for some drug supplier. Or posing as a pleasure habitat's satisfied customer. No luck.

But she did see Didi. Jill's cousin who disappeared from the strawberry fields. Someone Shirlee assumed was long dead. Snatched by the Boogie man.

Yet there was Didi, inviting her to a XXX spa. Older than when she'd disappeared, but not by much. This was a dated 3V from a cut-rate paradise, catering to budget minded pedophiles.

Horror and relief washed over her. Didi was alive. Not doing well, but alive. Or she was when this 3V was made.

Shirlee's whole world spun about her. If Didi was alive, Tina might be, and Carol. She shouted with glee, wanting someone, anyone, to share this with.

Of course there was no one, since speed-of-light lag cut her off from the cosmos. Instead she sent a terse tight-beamed message to Jill's family:

DD is alive N the B-system.

Anything more would make them feel worse.

Close to turnaround, a ship showed up on radar, headed straight at her. Not just any ship, a fast crewed vessel, decelerating at 3-gs from near light speed, with "bandit" written all over it. Who else would be hurtling toward an inhabited system while naval protection was away?

Her new neighbor signaled her:

CSR15379, you are off course, do you require assistance?

No thank you. Especially when 3V showed who was sending.

Curled in the oncoming ship's command couch was a SuperCat, a genetic combination of humans and big cats, with a long furry body, human hands, a bulging forehead, and six-inch dagger-like canines. Homo smilodon. Three-gs did not bother the mutant beast in the least. He asked languidly, "Hello human, are you there?"

She made no answer, hoping the gene-spliced killer would go on his way. "CSR15379, are you responding? Or are you merely a menace to navigation?"

He could not catch her, not at near-light closing velocity. But he could put a warhead into her out of sheer frustration.

Cautiously, she opened a voice-only channel. "This is not CSR15379."

"What ship are you?"

"*Lollypop*." That's what she looked like.

His saber-toothed grin widened. "Hello *Lollypop*. Do you need help?"

"Doing fine."

"Glad to hear that. How are things in the A-system?"

"Hectic."

He laughed aloud, clearly having heard the frantic calls for her to come about. "Good for you, girl. Want some advice?"

"Sure."

"You are boosting for Ashanti."

"Maybe." Her trajectory was easy to read.

"Beware of Greenies," the smiling predator warned. "They will rob you blind, then turn you in. You'll get the most for your cargo on Njovu V."

Njovu meant elephant in an ancient tongue, the name for a gas giant on the edge of Niger B system—a notorious base for wreckers and slavers. "Tell 'em Simba sent you."

"Thanks."

Simba signed off with a crisp, "Good hunting, girl."

Good hunting to you. Shirlee easily recognized cyber-stalking. Simba pegged her for a scared young female on the run. Unable to snatch her up himself, Simba was sending her to friends who could. Probably for payment at a later date.

Still, she dutifully adjusted her course for Njovu V, an icy outer moon of the gas giant. She could always return to an Ashanti trajectory, once safely out of warhead range.

Not halfway to the B-system, and mutant predators were already licking their toothy chops over her. Was there a single safe spot in the cosmos? Apparently not.

But going back to spend the rest of her life in JuVee had scant appeal.

Instead she studied *Lollypop*'s specs and manifest, trying to figure out how to defend her. By combining medical anesthetic with mining detonators, she could instantly flood any interior space with knock-out gas. Shirlee also attached high voltage surge generators to the cargo ladders and strategic deck areas.

Knowing how easily *Lollypop*'s controls could be overridden, Shirlee did her work with the cams off, avoiding ship's systems, using external power and code words keyed to her voice. No one else could trigger the traps. Or even tell they existed.

Turnaround came. She flipped *Lollypop* over, braking to enter the B-system. Njovu control sent her a friendly 3V. Speed-of-light lag made conversation impossible, but a handsome, helpful officer in the "rescue service" asked if she needed assistance. His flying-dragon ship badge read *Hiryu*, and he assured her, "We have a deep space tug waiting."

Again the eager offer to help, with no mention of her many crimes and misdemeanors. Clearly Njovu had no intention of sending her back to JuVee. How nice to be so wanted.

Staring at this smiling, tousle-haired officer from the *Hiryu*, Shirlee could not shake the feeling that she was finally seeing the Boogie man face to face.

She did not acknowledge the message, knowing that so long as she was shaping for Njovu, they would do nothing to stop her. Running orbits through the autopilot, she found the perfect point-instant to head for Ashanti.

Despite Simba's warning, her best chance lay with the Greenies. Not a great comment on her own species.

Niger B grew in size, becoming a small red sun, with a sprinkling of planets. When time came to switch trajectories, she did it from the command couch, not trusting the autopilot. Though Ashanti was the innermost planet, it was actually closer than Njovu, given her extreme angle to the ecliptic. Simple high-g braking would do.

As soon as she was on an Ashanti trajectory, Ashanti control called her. Speed-of-light lag was not near as bad now, and she could carry on a conversation of sorts. The Greenie who greeted her had grass-colored skin, matching her eyes. Her hair was flame red, a fetching combination. "Why are you coming here?"

Good question. She signaled back.

Nowhere lz 2 go.

While she awaited a reply, Shirlee studied the Photo sapien. Like SuperCats, Greenies had once been human. Now they were supposed to be better than human; non-violent vegetarians, immune to cancer, drugs, 3V, politics, religion, and all other forms of addictive behavior. Plus their bodies could turn air and sunlight into blood sugar.

"Are you armed?" asked the Greenie girl.

Not really.

"We do not allow anti-personnel weapons on planet." And they call Greenies uncivilized.

Great. My cargo is food, Rx, meds, ice-mining equipment.

"That will be much appreciated." The Greenie did not mention payment, since they had no money. Not that Njovu planned to pay her either.

Would Greenies consider her hand laser a weapon? Maybe. She needed a back-up. Her medical shipment contained high-pressure hypos of instant anesthetic. Even a Greenie could not object to her having a couple of those up her sleeve. She'd say she had trouble sleeping.

Checking her cams, Shirlee suited up just in case, then pressurized the inner lock to go and get the hypos. As she stepped out into the cargo module, with her helmet hanging open, the Boogie man grabbed her.

His hand closed over her mouth, keeping Shirlee from triggering her traps, while a horribly powerful arm pinned her suited arms to her side, so she could not reach the laser. Strong, implacable fingers pinched her nose closed.

Now she could not breathe. All her childhood fears came rushing back. He had her, and would not let go. She fought vainly to speak, plead, or just to breathe. None of that was allowed.

Not even the King could save her. Slowly her struggles eased, and Shirlee slid into blackness.

### Candy Shop

**S**hirlee never expected to awake, but she did. Still in her v-suit, she lay in one of *Lollypop's* cargo containers, seeing foam padding lit by light strips, and smelling like a JuVee toilet stall—a particular mix of sweat, urine, despair, and disinfectant.

Carol stared down at her, wearing just a worried look.

"Am I dead?" And gone to Graceland.

Carol shook her red locks. "You wish."

Too bad, because life seemed pretty horrible. Shirlee started to sob. Having Carol back was great, but not in some ghastly box. Her ship, her freedom, her hope for a future had all been snatched away. Incredibly unfair.

Carol held her while she cried, pushing blond curls out of her eyes, waiting for her sobs to subside.

When they did, Shirlee struggled to smile. "Good to see you, girlfriend."

"Good to see you." Too bad it had to be here.

"Sorry I'm such a sissy."

"Forget it," Carol told her. "I cried like a cranky baby at first. He had to beat me into shutting up."

"You were here this whole time? Since he grabbed you at Monrovia dock?"

"Where else?"

Totally logical. Carol and the Boogie man had been aboard all along. "How come he did not show on camera?"

"Cams were programmed to edit out his ninja suit."

"Sweet." Shirlee wished she'd thought of that. "Why did he wait to take the ship?"

"You were being too cautious."

Up until the end.

"So long as you were headed for Njovu, it hardly mattered," Carol added. "He had me to play with."

"Must have been awful."

"Nauseating." Carol pretended to puke. "But you get numb."

"He beat you?"

"Till I learned to please him."

They both grimaced at that.

"Wasn't hard." From the way Carol said it, Shirlee knew the Boogie man was listening.

"Take off the ninja PJs and he's no worse than the guys in JuVee." Carol examined her bruised hip. "The marks have mostly faded."



"So I see."

Carol apologized for her nudity. "He thought clothes got in the way."

"Tell me about it." Good thing she had a v-suit on. The wrenching shock of being seized and smothered had filled her suit waste-evac unit.

Just lying quietly was an effort, showing they were on high-g trajectory for Njovu. She had to get out of this box. Soon. While she still had a chance to make Ashanti. Having Carol back leveled things. Together they could beat him, somehow.

What would the King do? Naturally her hand laser was gone, leaving her with no cutting tools. Just her v-suit. Could a vacuum suit get her out of a sealed container? Lost in space, or even underwater, it would be great. But locked in a box?

Might happen. She asked Carol, "Want some clothes?"

Her friend shrugged. "He will just take them away."

"Maybe that's a good thing."

Carol caught her meaning. Both assumed the Boogie man was watching. What else would he be doing?

Sitting up, Shirlee stripped off her v-suit, giving Carol the ship's coveralls underneath. Absurdly small on the taller girl, but better than nothing—unless you were a guy looking on. Shirlee swiftly suited back up.

"Thanks." Carol gave her a grateful kiss.

As their lips parted, Shirlee mouthed, "Make-him-open-up."

Carol nodded, kissing her again, then laying down beside her. Not very romantic in a vacuum suit, but Carol knew their audience best.

Shirlee asked excitedly, "Did you know Didi is alive?"

"No!" Carol's eyes widened.

"Swear, I saw her. In a real sicko ad." Shirlee had always wanted to be a 3V child star, but not that badly.

"Think he took her too?"

"Would not put it past him."

"I've been sold online," Carol boasted. "To the Candy Shop on Njovu III."

Shirlee winced. "I saw the ads." It made Didi's brothel seem like a preschool.

"So did I." Carol took one of Shirlee's blonde curls, idly twisting it around her finger. "It turned him on to show me where I am going."

Shirlee smirked. "Got to beat being here."

That was the message she meant to send. This box was so boring, compared to what they might be doing. She prayed to Elviz that the Boogie man would open it up, to peel her out of her silly v-suit.

This same annoying suit kept him from just flooding the container with anesthetic. Her suit's alarms and oxy-tanks easily dealt with bad air. So he would have to unseal the box with Shirlee alert and awake.

Which he finally did, breaking the container seal from the outside. He could not resist having his latest acquisition just the way he wanted her.

Carol rolled her eyes to say, "Get ready."

Popping the lid, the Boogie man stood over them, hanging onto a cargo ladder, wearing his hooded black night suit. Goggle eyes glared at Shirlee out of a filter mask. Plainly this was meant to scare her, freezing her into submission.

Instead she shouted out, "Spark!"

Seventy-five thousand volts flashed through the cargo ladder from a hidden surge generator. His night suit protected him some, but not nearly enough.

Losing his grip on the ladder, her captor tumbled down and landed on the metal deck, which Shirlee had also electrified.

Ten seconds later, the shock ended, but the Boogie man still jerked about.

Hauling Carol out of the box, Shirlee made for the command deck, hopping over the convulsing slaver.

As soon as she had Carol safe on the command deck, Shirlee evacuated the inner lock, then flooded the cargo hold with anesthetic gas.

Matching orbits with Ashanti required more high-g braking, but Shirlee hardly cared, so long as it kept them out of the Candy Shop.

Twenty hours later, they docked at a Greenie habitat circum Ashanti, a great rotating torus full of light and chaos. Instead of flat fields and dark tunnels, Shirlee saw a low-g riot of green vines and giant trees reaching up to an artificial sun. Semi-nude Greenies flitted on gossamer wings between tree houses, and floating platforms borne aloft by helium reservoirs.

Shirlee stayed at the dock entrance, to be close to the ship, while Carol met with the 3V-shy Greenies.

Naked green-skinned kids crowded around her, laughing, joking, and stroking her bare skin. Photo sapiens did not watch 3V porno, so a young human woman was as rare as a female SuperCat, and infinitely more interesting. Even if she was merely waiting by an airlock in the de-spin system.

Carol returned, wading through giggling kids, who tugged at her ill-fitting coveralls. She told Shirlee, "All they ask is that we swear off weapons and violence."

Two human traits that horrified the locals. "They do not care that we stole this ship?"

Carol shrugged. "Not particularly."

That came from being illegal themselves. Like SuperCats, Greenies had been created secretly centuries earlier, in a gross violation of bioethics and the Universal Human Rights Act. To be totally within the law, all such "bio-engineered beings" would have to kill themselves. "They just want any human troubles kept off-world."

"Outstanding!"

"If we want to make ourselves useful," Carol added. "We can transport goods for a share of the cargo."

Fifteen and free, hard to believe. "Sounds fine by me."

Carol shook her head. "Greenies see us as totally good."

"Weird, when they hardly know you."

"Maybe." Carol smirked at the kids crowding around them.

"What do you mean?"

Carol said that grown-up Greenies had wanted to stroke her skin as well. "I got propositioned on the way here. A lot."

"That so?"

"Twice by women."

Shirlee grinned. "So, you gonna look for a Greenie guy?"

"Or gal," Carol reminded her. "You gonna look for Ivan?"

"Hard as I can." *Lollypop* had a cargo lander for loading in atmosphere. Shirlee had named it the *Liza-Marie*, and meant to take it down to Ashanti. Humans were rare there, so one as cute as Ivan should stand out.

"You know he's gonna have a Greenie girlfriend," Carol warned.

"Or three."

"But they're pacifists."

Both of them laughed at that. All humans, even teenage females, had an aura of violence that no Greenie could match. Stealing spaceships, resisting arrest, electrocuting Boogie men—no wonder they got a wary welcome.

"I want to find my dad too," Shirlee added. Her last fatherly contact had been a birthday call two years ago.

"Homesick?" Carol asked.

Shirlee shook her head.

"Me neither."

Shirlee grinned at the admiring young Greenies. "At home I'd be in Ju-Vee."

"And the Boogie man would be out on bail."

"Claiming we kidnapped him," Shirlee added.

"Prove we didn't."

"What will happen to him?" Shirlee had not seen their comatose captor since Greenies had taken him off the *Lollypop*. Slavers preyed on Greenies as well, and being vegi-pacifists did not make them pushovers—not totally.

"Hard to say," Carol admitted. "They don't believe in punishment, or the death penalty, but they don't believe in trials either. All they said is that he is a very, very bad human. So we won't be seeing him again."

Life without the Boogie man. What a concept. ○

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## Secret America

Is it heretical or the sign of a promiscuous liberality of judgment to compare any graphic novel to the prose masterpieces of Thomas Pynchon? This question conceals an underlying core debate: is the medium of comics inherently less sophisticated and impactful and artistically deep than that of novels?

Recently, when Gene Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* was nominated for a National Book Award in the broad category of YA Literature, a critic or two objected to the inclusion of a funnybook among works of prose fiction. On the other hand, *Time* magazine boldly added Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic novel *Fun Home* to its general year's-best book list without apology.

I'm inclined as a critic and reviewer and reader to place fiction-with-pictures on pretty much the same plane as fiction-without-pictures, while acknowledging that each mode has different strengths and weaknesses. Thus I have no problem in comparing Kim Deitch's wonderful new book of both words and illustrations, *Shadowland* (Fantagraphics, trade paper, \$18.95, 180 pages, ISBN 978-1-56097-771-1) to the oeuvre of Thomas Pynchon, especially something like Pynchon's latest, *Against the Day* (2006).

Both authors revel in the oft-times wacky (racist, sexist, ageist, and whatever-ist) detritus of forgotten pop culture, seeing in these decades-old effusions of the mass mind hid-

den cosmic significances. Both authors employ a kind of erratic, non-linear plotting by synchronicity and chance associations of characters. Both men endorse conspiracies as reality. Both gleefully and irreverently deploy an array of consensus SF tropes in wayward fashion.

Deitch's novel is basically the life story of two generations of the Ledicker family, father and son showmen of the most dissolute, greedy, shifty, scamming sort. The lives of the Ledicker *père et fils*, their relatives and lovers and hangers-on, would be fit material for a mimetic Westlake novel—were it not for the fact that one exhibit in the sleazy Ledicker sideshow is a crashed alien spaceship with inhabitants still alive, and that the family is also under observation by—and interference from—a secret subterranean race of dwarves. These touches of the uncanny transfigure all into pure fabulation, while still allowing Deitch an ashcan naturalism.

We open in the year 1897, with the elder Ledicker exhibiting a diving pig that helps sell his snake-oil. This first chapter is rather anomalous, seemingly a kind of simple American frontier tall tale. Nonetheless, all the seeds of what will follow are present in embryo.

(The serial printing of these stories in various magazines over a long span of years contributes, I think, to their occasional misalignment of continuity and tone. But overall, this essentially haphazard publication history works to actual advantage, conjuring up fruitful enigmas and

non-linear jumps and juxtapositions that a more compact and straightforward composition would not have allowed.)

From these humble beginnings, we will encounter killer geeks, orbiting cargo-trailer trucks, debauched orphanages, Hollywood silent-movie glamour, Polynesian castaways, heroic elephants, and a walk-on role by the author-artist himself. (Sounds pretty Pynchonesque, huh?) It all coheres into a hypnotic secret history of America, or at least one particular corner of this gonzo nation.

Deitch's artwork is both ultra-modern and old-fashioned. His deep affection for the fashions and physiognomies of the early twentieth century conjures up some lost comic strip of the yellow journalism era. But his layouts and sophisticated bag of artistic tricks within each panel reflect the full range of the past century of graphic narratives. (Several extra features in this edition, including two gorgeous foldouts, add to the effect of the main story.)

Deitch's work, with its parade of misfits, schemers, freaks, and con-men, is a love letter to America in all its sodden, sordid, unrepentant glory.

### Secret Planet

As I indict this review, the online used-book emporium known as Abe-Books offers for sale precisely two copies (in its primal 1993 Owlswick Press incarnation) of Avram Davidson's *Adventures in Unhistory*—the last book of that unique author published during his too-short lifetime (1923-1993). The merchant in possession of the lower-priced selection asks a mere \$400.00; the other, upward of \$800.00. Which explains why I have not heretofore handled a

copy of this rarity, which, in its market preciousness and collectibility, has ironically come to resemble one of the mythological beasts discussed within its own pages.

Stop. I vow that the rest of this review will not seek impossibly and involuntarily to emulate the ornate, recondite, witty, yet altogether engrossing and captivating style that Davidson employs in these pages.

And how would I know what style he employs in said volume, if I've never perused it? Why, because the majority of the essays that comprise it first appeared in this very magazine, where I did indeed joyously read them, and also because the generous and wise folks at Tor Books have at long last reissued a facsimile edition (which means you get the great George Barr illos as well as Davidson's scintillating words) of *Adventures in Unhistory* (hardcover, \$25.95, 308 pages, ISBN 978-0-765-30760-6), and huzzah to them!

All right. I'm not being too successful in avoiding a bad pastiche of Davidson's prosaic (as in "characteristic of [his] prose," not, most certainly not, "not having any features that are interesting or imaginative") manner. Maybe this fit will pass. . . .

But the book. Subtitled "Conjectures on the Factual Foundations of Several Ancient Legends," the book consists of fifteen sojourns through myth, legend, and science, concerned specifically with, but not limited to—oh, no, certainly not *limited*—Sinbad, the Phoenix, dragons, man-drakes, werewolves, Aleister Crowley, Prester John, the origins of silk, the land of Hyperborea, head-hunting, unicorns, mammoths, extinct birds, the Moon, and mermaids.

What Davidson does is cultural detective work, assembling the clues that will reveal the inner meanings

of his resonant conundrums. He spins them all into a golden fleece (see page fifty-one, for thoughts on that aureate pelt's dragonish associations) of narrative that dips and winds (a fleece dipping and winding? We're in flying carpet territory!) through many a land and clime and era, filled with a vast cast of exotic characters. The result is like listening to the voice of History Himself, telling all the really good esoteric anecdotes left out of the official texts. A secret history of the whole globe.

There was precedent for Davidson's demythifying/remythifying and his rambling, shaggy-backed conjectures. He himself generously cites L. Sprague de Camp, Willy Ley, and Charles Fort. And I always associated Davidson's writing with someone vaguely similar who happened to come coincidentally to prominence right about the same time as these pieces: James Burke, and his books/television series *Connections*.

But truth be told, all these antecedents fail to hold a candle to Davidson's impassioned, champagne-giddy ("There is a feeling of giddiness which affects diverse people on reading things like this . . .") romps through the kind of material that naturally appeals to those of us who love the fantastic.

Aside from the main intellectual attractions of this book comes another gift: many passages and snippets of autobiography, supplied by Davidson as illustrations of his points. We emerge from this Campbellian—Joseph Campbell, that is—odyssey not only bedazzled by his erudition and wit, but also with a portrait of the man himself in all his mundane (well, not mundane but quotidian) reality and heft.

Davidson closes his book with an explanation of the Buddhist concept

of Indra's Net, where every time any two threads cross, an infinite jewel is born, reflecting all others in the net. Davidson was just such a jewel.

## Fans Are Clanes

Baen Books now offers us a stimulating and meaty A.E. van Vogt omnibus in the form of *Transgalactic* (trade paperback, \$15.00, 439 pages, ISBN 978-1-4165-2089-4), and it's a definite winner. How pleasant to see the works of this most idiosyncratic of Grand Masters staying alive and available for a new generation.

But what's particularly exciting about this volume is that the editors—Eric Flint and David Drake—scrupulously went back to the original magazine appearances of the material, rather than the "fixup" versions that van Vogt tinkered with for book publication years afterward. This gives us a chance to appreciate the stories as the original generation of Golden Age readers did, to examine van Vogt's skills as a pulpster and serializer, and to get some sense of the ambiance of Golden Age *Astounding* magazine—since all of the material originated there.

What we have in this package are: 1) five stories from 1946–47 that constitute a novel titled *Empire of the Atom*, which first reached book form in 1957; 2) the serialized version (April–June of 1950) of the sequel, *The Wizard of Linn*, which materialized as a book in 1962; 3) two linked stories from 1942 that focus on man's relations with aliens named the ezvals (and which fit into the future history depicted in *The War Against the Rull* [1959]); 4) and finally, three long stories from 1943–45 that were later assembled as the novel *Mission to the Stars* in 1952.

Sounds complicated, and it is. The publishing history of van Vogt's stories is insanely baroque. But all of this only concerns nerdy critics such as myself. The average reader will simply plunge whole-heartedly into this book for its narrative pleasures.

*Empire of the Atom* is the story of Clane Linn, a mutant born into a post-apocalyptic empire on a battered old radioactive Earth. Possessed of superior intelligence, but physically unimpressive (how fast can you say "fanboy analog"?), Clane must survive the internecine power struggles of his ruling family, as well as threats from without the empire, such as barbarians from the moon Europa. Like Asimov's contemporaneous *Foundation* series, this tale invokes parallels with ancient Rome. But whereas Asimov had the broad historical sweep of Gibbon in mind, van Vogt seemed to have been inspired more by Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934), with its very personal catalogue of deceit and murder and Machiavellian doings. The plot of this book is linear, unlike van Vogt's famously recompllicated classics, and there is little of convoluted imaginary thought-systems, nor any dreamlike leaps of logic, amidst the surprisingly sophisticated and even cynical realpolitik.

The sequel, *The Wizard of Linn*, broadens the scope to interstellar dimensions, as Clane and company go searching for a solution to an invasion of Earth by aliens called the Riss. Some super-science comes into play, but the emphasis remains on political intrigue. Clane's emotional growth and turmoil are not neglected either, and there are some surprisingly resonant moments here, especially involving Clane's wife, and the book's muted coda.

All in all, then, a nice exposure of a facet of van Vogt's talents not up-

permost in his one-dimensional literary persona.

The two ezwal stories are neat little problem pieces that move at lightning speed. And then comes *Mission to the Stars*.

Here the reader will get all the quintessential van Vogt frissons he or she demands. Gigantic starcruisers from Imperial Earth that can subjugate entire galaxies; lost colonies of "Dellian robots"; the "Mixed Men" and their paired brains; alluring female starship captains; and dialogue such as this: "I shall subject it [a Mixed Man brain] to the greatest concentration of conditioning ever focused on a human brain, using the two basics: sex and logic. I shall have to use you, noble lady, as the object of his affections."

They just don't write 'em like that anymore. And why the hell not???

### Interrogating the World

If I had to venture a guess, I'd say that the esteemed literary reputation of Elizabeth Hand rests mainly on her novels, eight masterful, slippery, slipstreamy volumes, none of which (aside from the first three that form a trilogy) recapitulate their predecessors. (Which is not to say that they do not all observably emanate from the same keen sensibility and deep talent.) And certainly she maintains as well a high profile as a critic, with regular columns in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the Washington *Post Book World*. But despite receiving an award or three, her short fiction gets a tad overlooked, it seems to me, just because there's less of it. We need to make sure that her work at shorter lengths, which is just as remarkable as her novels, does not



remain concealed in the shadow of the big books. So let me now direct your gaze to *Saffron and Brimstone* (M Press, trade paperback, \$14.95, 240 pages, ISBN 978-1-59582-096-9).

(M Press, by the way, is a new imprint from the comics publisher, Dark Horse, with the capable hand of editor Rob Simpson on the tiller, and bears watching as well.)

This book incorporates a previous volume from PS Publishing titled *Bibliomancy*, with substantial additions and a subtraction: "Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol" is not present.

"Cleopatra Brimstone" opens the volume with a shocker about a mild young woman named Jane Kendall who develops an alternate personality after emotional and physical trauma. Reminiscent of the work of M. John Harrison and early Kathe Koja, it manages to conjure up shades of James Tiptree as well. "Pavane for a Prince of the Air" is a mimetic piece that poetically keens a muted, heart-felt elegy for a free spirit and the era that birthed him. In the John Crowleyesque "The Least Trumps," we follow the life of Ivy Tun, a tattoo artist by trade, as she discovers a pack of cards that might possess the power to remake the continuum. And the messed-up early college years of a woman prone to visions is the focus of "Wonderwall."

The final four pieces are thematically and tonally linked under the heading "The Lost Domain." "Kronia" chronicles the many serendipitous non-meetings of a man and a woman. "Calypso in Berlin" brings a classic Greek nymph into the modern era. An end-times scenario unfurls through the eyes of an isolated writer in "Echo." And lastly, the heretofore-unpublished story "The Saffron Gatherers" finds two lovers forever separated by a large-scale disaster.

Hand's stories all exhibit a num-

ber of virtues. She anchors her fantastical conceits in closely observed and lovingly brushstroked reality, oftentimes drawing on semi-autobiographical experiences, as we read in her "Afterword" to "The Lost Domain." This unflinching incorporation of the sinews of her own life adds immense power to the stories—whether the reader even recognizes their origin or not. Additionally, on a line by line basis, Hand writes some of the most beautiful sentences around, either in the genre or outside: consider the beautiful way Ivy Tun describes the physicality of tattooing on page 101 as one example. And Hand's creation of characters is perceptive and empathetic.

But what I'd identify as perhaps the strongest, most invigorating flavor in her work is a poking and prodding at the tenor of reality. As an author—and also while wearing the skins of her protagonists—Hand is always concerned with the nature of life and the cosmos. Is existence false or authentic, joyous or sorrowful, simple or complex—or every quality you can imagine simultaneously? These kind of ontological issues often become explicit—as when the protagonist of "Wonderwall" says she believes that "meaning and transcendence could be shaken from the world, like unripe fruit from a tree; then consumed." But even if only a subtext, Hand's quest for a visionary experience of the bedrock of creation is the engine that ultimately propels all her bold and adventurous narratives.

#### **Absurdist Truths, Surreal Verities**

Assemble the dead: Jorge Luis Borges, Donald Barthelme, Lord Dunsany.

Assemble the living: Kelly Link, Don Webb, Zoran Zivkovic, Stepan Chapman, William Browning Spencer, Barrington Bayley, Neal Barrett, Jr., Ray Vukcevic.

Now let the guest of honor part the curtains and emerge in his humble yet self-assured manner to receive the applause of these simpatico peers, cold-bodied and warm-bodied alike: Bruce Holland Rogers.

In 2005 appeared from Wheatland Press—one of our finer small presses, run by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake—a story collection titled *The Keyhole Opera* (trade paperback, \$19.95, 232 pages, ISBN 0-9755903-7-5). A fair amount of unfortunate silence ensued. But a subset of alert and receptive minds responded, and in 2006 *The Keyhole Opera* won the World Fantasy Award for Best Collection. Short fanfare, and then the world at large went back to sleep, with very little formal recognition of the graces and delights of this book. Here, now, almost two years after its publication (yet with its continued availability assured, thanks to Wheatland's merits as a smart publisher), we will remedy this, thus acknowledging that excellent fiction is timeless.

Bruce Holland Rogers offers us more than three dozen stories in the span of some two hundred pages, so you can immediately guess that they are generally bite-sized ones. But do not let this fact cause you to underestimate their impact. These multivalent parables and deceptively straightforward narratives pack

punches out of all proportion to their size. Whether inhabiting the ancient classical past, some indeterminate land "beyond the fields we know," or the meticulously observed present, Rogers's stories make the most out of every single carefully chosen word. He has the knack of hooking a reader with a great opening sentence, usually of primal simplicity ("A young man from a fishing village once went to the Capital to see what he could see," from "Half of the Empire"). Then he plunges into a glass labyrinth of incident and meaning. You think you're in a place without walls, but really you're mazed in the author's crystalline construct.

Rogers is also a formalistic innovator, having invented a story format he calls the "symmetrina." (Classy warm-up presenter Michael Bishop, so taken with this mode, offers us one of his own in his loving introduction.) And he also produces avant-garde pieces like "Invasions," which feature neither plot nor character nor setting, but which compel attention nonetheless. In fact, "Invasions" is one of the most powerful anti-war stories I've ever read, critiquing non-ideologically our whole Iraq fiasco better than a thousand polemics. And with a bittersweet humor that is a Rogers trademark.

At once ancient and postmodern, the stories in this volume are mini-masterpieces, built cunningly to outlast the flashier fictions that might command reams of reviews, but which hardly are recalled beyond their brief heydays. ○

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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The Archon NASFiC has been re-named in honor of Wilson Arthur (Bob) Tucker. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## AUGUST 2007

2-5—TuckerCon. For info, write: Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [archonstl.org](http://archonstl.org). (E-mail) [info@archonstl.org](mailto:info@archonstl.org). Con will be held in: Collinsville IL (near St. Louis MO) (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Gateway Center. Guests will include: Barbara Hambly. No. American SF Con for 2007.

3-6—MythCon. [mythsoc.org](http://mythsoc.org). Berkeley CA. Ellen Kushner, Delia Sherman. High fantasy (Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, etc.).

3-5—DiversiCon. [diversicon.org](http://diversicon.org). Bloomington MN. Andrea Hairston, Christopher Jones, Melissa S. Kaercher.

3-5—Lazy Dragon Con. (972) 948-3320. [lazydragon.com](http://lazydragon.com). Hotel phone (888) 890-0242. Dallas TX area.

3-5—OtaKon. [otakon.org](http://otakon.org). Convention Center at the Inner Harbor, Baltimore MD. Big anime meet.

10-12—ArmadilloCon. [fact.org](http://fact.org). Austin TX. Guests to be announced. A general SF and fantasy convention.

10-12—PiCon. [pi-con.org](http://pi-con.org). West Springfield MA. Author C. E. Murphy, musician Voltaire, Web cartoonist Jeph Jacques.

10-12—ConGlomeration. [conglomeration.org](http://conglomeration.org). Clarion, Louisville KY. Ben Bova, Daniel Dos Santos, & a mystery guest.

16-19—GenCon, 120 Lakeside Ave. #100, Seattle WA 98122. [gencon.com](http://gencon.com). Indianapolis IN. Big gaming convention.

17-19—SpazzyCon, c/o Raven, Rt. 15, Lafayette NJ 07848. [sickpups.org](http://sickpups.org). Northern NJ. NY/NJ costumers' big do.

18-19—Fanex, 9721 Brittanay Ln., Baltimore MD 21234. [midmar.com](http://midmar.com). For fans of horror films.

24-26—BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 459-8734. [bubonicon.com](http://bubonicon.com). V. Vinge, Lindsfold, Stout.

24-27—World SF Reader Con. Chengdu China. Timed for easy combining with the Japanese WorldCon the next week.

30-Sep. 3—Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. [nippon2007.org](http://nippon2007.org). Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$220+.

31-Sep. 3—DragonCon, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (770) 909-0115. [dragoncon.org](http://dragoncon.org). Marriott & Hyatt. Huge.

## SEPTEMBER 2007

7—ConMart, c/o Martel Enterpr., 309 S. School Av., Fayetteville AR 72701. [con-mart.com](http://con-mart.com). [chubberman@cox.net](http://chubberman@cox.net).

7-9—CopperCon, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85062. (480) 949-0415. [casfs.org/cucon/](http://casfs.org/cucon/). Traditional post-WorldCon con.

14-16—Oxonmoot. [tolkiensociety.info](http://tolkiensociety.info). Oxford UK. Tolkien & other high fantasy (C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, etc.).

21-23—FenCon, Box 560576, The Colony TX 75056. [fencon.org](http://fencon.org). [info@fencon.org](mailto:info@fencon.org). Dallas TX. Details to be announced.

21-23—Foolscap, c/o Little Cat Z, Box 2461, Seattle WA 98111. [foolscapcon.org](http://foolscapcon.org). For SF & fantasy writing & art.

21-23—EuroCon. (+45207) 50181. [fantastik.dk](http://fantastik.dk). Copenhagen, Denmark. David A. Hardy. European continental con.

21-23—British Fantasy Con. [fantasycon.org.uk](http://fantasycon.org.uk). [fcon@britishfantasysociety.org.uk](mailto:fcon@britishfantasysociety.org.uk). In the UK. Long-running con.

27-30—BoucherCon. [bouchercon.com](http://bouchercon.com). Anchorage AK. The mystery fiction WorldCon, named after Anthony Boucher.

28-30—Arcana, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959. St. Paul MN. For fans of dark fantasy.

28-30—Otaku University. [otakuuniversity.com](http://otakuuniversity.com). Mesa Convention Center, Mesa AZ. Deborah Deacon. Anime.

## OCTOBER 2007

5-7—ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436. [contextsf.org](http://contextsf.org). For written SF and fantasy.

5-8—GaylaxiCon, 375 Highland Ave. #201, Atlanta GA 30312. [gaylaxicon2007.org](http://gaylaxicon2007.org). Atlanta GA. Gay-friendly con.

## AUGUST 2008

6-10—Denvention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. [denvention3.org](http://denvention3.org). Bujold, Whitmore, McCarthy. WorldCon. \$130+.

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# NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/  
NOVEMBER  
DOUBLE  
ISSUE

Our Thirtieth Anniversary Year continues at a breathless pace. The *Asimov's* October/November double issue has long been our most hotly anticipated, a yearly cornucopia of the very best we have to offer. And, though we don't like to play favorites with the issues of the magazine we produce, or seem unnecessarily effusive with garish hyperbole, we must admit we've got a doozy planned for you next month.

Our lead story is by the ever-popular **Allen M. Steele**, whose "Coyote" series of stories have numbered as some of the most popular with our readers. It is thus with greatest pleasure that we announce the first part of a brand new serial from Steele, set in the Coyote universe—a thrilling novel in four installments: *Galaxy Blues*! Allen's truly outdone himself this time, with a sprawling adventure about the great lengths a man will go to find himself "Down and Out on Coyote." Don't miss it!

ALSO  
IN  
OCTOBER/  
NOVEMBER

That isn't even close to all we display in October/November. **Robert Reed** returns with a stunning, modern take on one of the most popular and enduring science-fiction tales of all time—we proudly present Reed's "Night Calls" alongside the story that inspired it, **Isaac Asimov's** immortal tale, "Nightfall." Acclaimed writer **Greg Egan**, after far too long, presents "Dark Integers," a return to the chilling computer-milieu of 1995's "Luminous." **Lisa Goldstein** graces our pages with the "Dark Rooms" of Méliès and early cinéaste; **Carol Emshwiller** contributes a tale "At Sixes and Sevens" that might change your tune about the strange neighbors next door and their obnoxious pagan rituals; newcomer **Susan Forest** presents an ant farm unlike any you've seen in "Paid in Full"; **Chris Butler** submits "The Turn," an unusual story to rank with classic New Wave SF; **Liz Williams's** savage science-fantasy yarn, "Debatable Lands," will have you guessing until the surprising conclusion; **Michael Cassutt** sends you down to "Skull Valley" where the residents are a little rougher around the edges than you may be accustomed to; and **Carl Frederick** spreads his arms wide to the "Leonid Skies" so a group of familiarly modern children can experience the wonders of the heavens.

EXCITING  
FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column continues his irregular series by "Rereading Theodore Sturgeon"; **Norman Spinrad** unearths "Buried Treasures" in "On Books"; plus an array of pleasant poetry. Look for our October/November issue at your newsstand on September 4, 2007. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, ([www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com))—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up!

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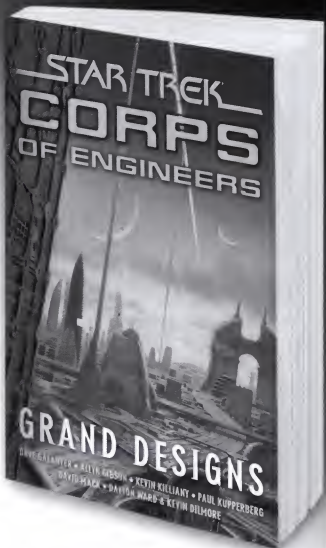
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